Topic 12: Behavioral Biases

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Spring, 2020
General Model of Bias

- I like rational models :-)
- They provide a starting point for understanding behavior and forming normative opinions about policies

- But, there is evidence in a wide range of settings that behavior is not well-described by the canonical rational model

- This lecture: consider implications of violations of rational/canonical model

- Then present evidence in several settings:
  - Take Up of Benefits and EITC
  - Inertia in Health Insurance
  - Unemployment and Job Search
  - Savings
  - Slutsky symmetry and consideration sets
1 General Model of Bias: Information versus Understanding

2 Imperfect Take Up of Benefits: The Case of EITC

3 Inertia in Health Insurance

4 Unemployment and Job Search

5 Savings

6 Unsolicited Thoughts
At the outset, I think it’s important to discuss bias vs. imperfect information – what do we mean by “behavioral bias” or “rational”? My view: it relates to if/how we can invoke the envelope theorem.

Suppose individuals make choices \( a \in \Omega(p) \), where \( \Omega(p) \) is some choice set that depends on some vector of policies, \( p \).

- \( a \) can be labor supply, savings, consumption, etc.
- \( p \) can be taxes, the ease-of-use of the Obamacare website, the frequency and use of IRS EITC eligibility notices, 401K default option settings, etc.

Results in “experienced utility”, \( v(a) \).

Individuals make decisions to maximize potentially different utility function, \( u(a) \).

\[
U(p) = \max_{a \in \Omega(p)} u(a) = u(a^*(p))
\]

where \( a^*(p) \) is the set of choices the individual makes under policy \( p \).
Consider marginal policy change, “dp”, that changes behavior, \( \frac{da^*}{dp} \).

Do we care?

Envelope theorem: Welfare impact only depends on how \( dp \) affects constraint set, \( \Omega \), weighted by marginal utilities, \( u_a \) (formally: \( U'(p) = \partial_p \Omega \nabla_a u \))

- If increases budget by $1, then policy is valued at $1
- Irrespective of whether the policy causes a change in behavior, \( \frac{da^*}{dp} \)!  

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“Violation” of the Envelope Theorem

- When people are not maximizing their experienced utility, behavioral responses can have first order welfare impacts.

- Write experienced utility as

\[ V(p) = v(a^*(p)) = U(p) + v(a^*(p)) - u(a^*(p)) \]

- Behavioral Bias

so that

\[ V'(p) = U'(p) + \frac{da^*}{dp} [v_a - u_a] \]

- Std Welfare

- Improved Choices

- Additional welfare impact if the policy causes people to make better (or worse) decisions
  
  - Increasing \( a \) increases welfare if people’s decisions under-value their experienced utility, \( v_a > u_a \)
  
  - And vice-versa if \( v_a < u_a \)

- Like an externality with marginal damage valued at \( v_a - u_a \): “Internality”
Why might experienced and decision utility diverge?

- Inherent biases
  - Present biasedness
  - Difficulty with probability inference

- Cognitive constraints

- Lack of knowledge (Statistical decision theory analogue)

- Lack of understanding of how actions today affect outcomes in future
1. General Model of Bias: Information versus Understanding

2. Imperfect Take Up of Benefits: The Case of EITC

3. Inertia in Health Insurance

4. Unemployment and Job Search

5. Savings

6. Unsolicited Thoughts
Imperfect Take-Up of Benefits

- Large literature documenting how people do not take up benefits that they are seemingly eligible for
  - e.g. Deshpande paper for DI
- Here: focus on two studies analyzing the EITC
  - Information treatment: Bhargava and Manoli (2015, AER)
  - Geographic variation in take-up: Chetty, Friedman, Saez (2013)
Study imperfect take up of EITC benefits
- Roughly 25% of benefits are unclaimed
- Average of $1K per person (roughly 1 month of earnings...)

Two models of low take up:
1. Confusion and lack of understanding
2. Stigma

In model 1, increasing take up improves welfare,
- “$u_a < v_a$” as choosing to take up benefits increases utility

In model 2, increasing take up is pure social waste because of envelope theorem
- $u_a = v_a$ as individuals were indifferent to taking up benefits because of the social stigma cost
To distinguish these theories, paper conducts randomized experiment with the IRS to increase knowledge of benefits.

Send mailers to all CA taxpayers who failed to claim 2009 EITC credit despite presumed eligibility given information on their return.

- Provided information about EITC and offered opportunity to re-file.

Informed people of roughly $26M in unclaimed benefits.

- Roughly $4M was paid as a result of the experiment.

Experimental conditions included:

- Simple and Complex Notices
- Variation in potential benefit advertising
- Stigma: include wording saying that money is from the result of hard work.
Panel A1. Simple notice (control)

Important Information about the Earned Income Credit

You may be eligible for a refund

Summary

Our records show that you may be eligible for a refund called the Earned Income Credit (EIC), which you did not claim on your 2009 tax form. The credit is for certain people who have worked and have earned income. You should complete the worksheet on Page 3 to determine if you are eligible for the credit.

What you need to do

Complete the Earned Income Credit Worksheet on Page 3.

If the worksheet confirms that you are eligible for the credit, sign and date the attached worksheet, and mail it to us in the enclosed envelope.

If the worksheet indicates that you are not eligible for the credit, please do not return the worksheet to us.

Next steps

If you are eligible for the credit, we will send you a refund check in 6 to 8 weeks. If you owe back taxes or other debts, each on child support which we are required to collect, we will use your credit to reduce or pay off those debts.

Next year, to receive your refund more quickly, write “EIC” on the EIC line of your form 1040. If you qualify for the credit, the IRS will calculate it for you and send you a check.

Additional information

If you need additional assistance, please call 1-800-829-1040, or visit online at www.irs.gov/taxtips. For tax forms, call 1-800-TAX-FORM (1-800-829-3676).

You can also find tax forms and other helpful documents which explain the EIC program in greater detail (e.g., Publication 596) at www.irs.gov.

Panel A2. Complex notice (page 1 of 2)

You May Be Eligible for a Refund
If You Qualify for the Earned Income Credit

Why We Are Sending You this Notice

You may qualify for the earned income credit (EIC). The EIC is for certain people who work and have earned income. This tax credit usually means more money in your pocket. It reduces the amount of tax you owe, and may give you a refund. Our records show:

- Your income falls in the eligible range to receive the EIC.
- You have a dependent who may be an EIC qualifying child, and
- You did not claim the EIC on your 2009 Individual Income Tax Return.

What You Need to Do

Income is not the only condition that determines if you qualify for EIC. We need you to complete the enclosed EIC Eligibility Check-Sheet to see if you may qualify for the EIC. Take the following steps to complete the check-sheet:

- Check that you are eligible for the EIC in Step 1.
  - If your Social Security Number is not valid or if you are a qualifying dependent of another person, you do not qualify.
  - If your Social Security Number is valid and you are not a qualifying dependent of another person, you may qualify. Continue to Step 2 only if you did not check a box next to any of the eligibility criteria in Step 1.

- In Steps 2 and 3, fill in the name and Social Security number for each child who may qualify you for the EIC and check that each child meets the stated requirements.
  - Any NO answer for a child means that child is not your qualifying child for the EIC. Do not respond to this notice unless you have a qualifying child.
  - All YES answers mean a child is your qualifying child for the EIC. Sign and date the declaration on the last page of this notice. Mail the completed EIC Eligibility Worksheet to us in the enclosed envelope.

Note: Return the EIC Worksheet to us only if you determine you may qualify for the EIC.
High and Low Benefit Treatments

Panel C1. Benefit display (high)

Important information about the Earned Income Credit
You may be eligible for a refund of up to $5,657

Do not discard or overlook this notice because you may be entitled to some additional money. Depending on your earnings and eligibility, your benefit can be up to $5,657.

What you need to do

- Complete the Earned Income Credit Worksheet on Page 3.
- If the worksheet confirms that you are eligible for the credit, sign and date the attached worksheet, and mail it to us in the enclosed envelope. If the worksheet indicates that you are not eligible for the credit, please do not return the worksheet to us.

Next steps

- If you are eligible for the credit, we will send you a refund check in 6 to 8 weeks. If you owe back taxes or other debts, such as child support which we are required to collect, we will use your credit to reduce or pay off those debts.
- Next year, receive your refund more quickly, write "EIC" on the EIC line of your form 1040. If you qualify for the credit, the IRS will calculate it for you and send you a check.

Additional information

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Panel C2. Benefit display (low)

Important information about the Earned Income Credit
You may be eligible for a refund of up to $457

Do not discard or overlook this notice because you may be entitled to some additional money. Depending on your earnings and eligibility, your benefit can be up to $457.

What you need to do

- Complete the Earned Income Credit Worksheet on Page 3.
- If the worksheet confirms that you are eligible for the credit, sign and date the attached worksheet, and mail it to us in the enclosed envelope.
- If the worksheet indicates that you are not eligible for the credit, please do not return the worksheet to us.

Next steps

- If you are eligible for the credit, we will send you a refund check in 6 to 8 weeks. If you owe back taxes or other debts, such as child support which we are required to collect, we will use your credit to reduce or pay off those debts.
- Next year, receive your refund more quickly, write "EIC" on the EIC line of your form 1040. If you qualify for the credit, the IRS will calculate it for you and send you a check.

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RCT Results

![Bar Chart]

- Control mailing: -6%
- Complex notice: -4%
- Complex worksheet: -4%
- Benefit display: +8%
- Transaction cost display: -1%
- Indemnification: +0%
- Informational flyer: -4%
- Envelope message: -1%
- Personal stigma: -1%
- Social stigma: -4%

Program information: 23%
Complexity: 30%
Stigma: 30%
Figure 6. Heterogeneity in Response to Simplification by Earned Income
(For recipients with dependents)
Results suggest:
- Imperfect information about benefits affects take up
- Displaying potential benefits increases take up
- Complicated forms reduce take up
- Increases take up at all eligible income levels

Does this suggest that increasing take up increases recipient welfare?
Previous literature documents bunching of EITC recipients at the revenue-maximizing kink point (Saez 2010)

Chetty Friedman and Saez (2013) study bunching of EITC claimants at the refund-maximizing kink point

Here: borrow slides discussing this paper from Chetty (2015, AER)

Taxable Income Distribution for EITC Claimants in Texas

Percent of Tax Filers
2%
3%
4%
5%
1%
0%

Taxable Income

$2,600
$12,600
$22,600
$32,600
Taxable Income Distribution for EITC Claimants in Texas

- Percent of Tax Filers:
  - 2%
  - 3%
  - 4%
  - 5%
  - 1%
  - 0%

- Taxable Income:
  - Sharp “bunching” at refund-maximizing point
  - [Saez 2010]

- Graph showing the distribution of taxable income with a peak at $12,600 and a sharp decrease below and above this point.
Taxable Income Distribution for EITC Claimants in Kansas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taxable Income</th>
<th>Percent of Tax Filers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$12,600</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$22,600</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$32,600</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fraction of Tax Filers Who Report Income that Maximizes EITC Refund in 1996

Note: Darker Color = More EITC Sharp Bunching
Fraction of Tax Filers Who Report Income that Maximizes EITC Refund in 1999

Note: Darker Color = More EITC Sharp Bunching
Fraction of Tax Filers Who Report Income that Maximizes EITC Refund in 2002

Note: Darker Color = More EITC Sharp Bunching
Fraction of Tax Filers Who Report Income that Maximizes EITC Refund in 2005

Note: Darker Color = More EITC Sharp Bunching
Fraction of Tax Filers Who Report Income that Maximizes EITC Refund in 2008

Note: Darker Color = More EITC Sharp Bunching
Why does impact of EITC on income vary so much across areas?

Plausible behavioral model: differences in knowledge about EITC

To test this explanation, consider individuals who move

Knowledge model predicts asymmetric impact of moving:

- Moving to a higher-bunching area should raise EITC refund
- Moving to a lower-bunching area should not affect EITC refund
Effects of Moving to Higher vs. Lower Bunching Areas on EITC Refund Amounts

Change in ZIP-3 Sharp Bunching Rate Among Prior Residents

Change in EITC Refund for Movers ($)

\[ \beta = 59.7 \ (5.7) \]

\[ \beta = 6.0 \ (6.2) \]

p-value for diff. in slopes: \( p < 0.0001 \)
Chetty, Friedman, and Saez (2013): Clear Bunching

- Paper documents clear evidence of heterogeneous bunching across areas
  - Driven mainly by self-employed (Saez 2010)
  - Easy to manipulate income

- Paper goes on to exploit bunching variation to ask a much deeper (more difficult) question:
  - How does EITC affect real labor supply?
Income Distribution For Single Wage Earners with One Child

Is the EITC having an effect on this distribution?

Percent of Wage Earners

EITC Amount ($)

W-2 Wage Earnings
Income Distribution For Single Wage Earners with One Child
High vs. Low Sharp Bunching Areas

Percent of Wage Earners
EITC Amount ($)

W-2 Wage Earnings

Lowest Information Decile
Highest Information Decile

$0 $5K $10K $15K $20K $25K $30K $35K

$0k $10K $20K $30K $25K $35K $15K $5K $0

Lowest Information Decile
Highest Information Decile
Comparisons across areas could be biased by omitted variables

Study changes in earnings around childbirth to address this concern

- Individuals without children are essentially ineligible for the EITC
- Birth of a child generates sharp variation in marginal incentives
Earnings Distribution in the Year Before First Child Birth for Wage Earners

- 2% of individuals earn $0.
- 4% of individuals earn $10K.
- 6% of individuals earn $30K.

Lowest Information Decile

Highest Information Decile

W-2 Wage Earnings

Percent of Individuals
Earnings Distribution in the Year of First Child Birth for Wage Earners

- Percent of Individuals
  - 2%
  - 4%
  - 0%
  - 6%

- Wages
  - $0
  - $30K
  - $40K
  - $10K
  - $20K

Lowest Information Decile
Highest Information Decile

W-2 Wage Earnings

Percent of Individuals vs. W-2 Wage Earnings

- Lowest Information Decile
- Highest Information Decile
Summary

- Paper goes on to document that EITC primarily increases earnings in the phase-in region as opposed to reductions in phase-out region
  - Suggests EITC increases labor supply and real earnings
- Welfare implications?
  - Depends on whether we think it is good to increase labor supply...
    - Externalities?
    - Or does the envelope theorem apply?
General Model of Bias: Information versus Understanding

Imperfect Take Up of Benefits: The Case of EITC

Inertia in Health Insurance

Unemployment and Job Search

Savings

Unsolicited Thoughts
Evidence people also make “sub-optimal” choices in health insurance contexts
- Plans are often difficult to understand

But, not clear privately inefficient choices lead to socially inefficient outcomes


Studies choice of two PPO contracts
- In year 0, tradeoff between greater coverage and price
  - PPO500 is better if have high expenses
- In year 1, PPO250 completely dominates PPO500
Panel A. PPO health insurance plan characteristics, $t_0$ low-income family

- $PPO_{500}$ out-of-pocket maximum
- $PPO_{250}$ out-of-pocket maximum
- Coinsurance
- Deductible
- Premium

$t_0$ in-network total medical expenses*
Panel B. PPO health insurance plan characteristics, $t_1$ low-income family

- $PPO_{250}$ out-of-pocket maximum
- $PPO_{500}$ out-of-pocket maximum
- Coinsurance
- Deductible
- Premium

Total employee expenses vs. $t_1$ in-network total medical expenses*

*Note: $t_1$ in-network total medical expenses refer to the total medical expenses incurred by the family within their network.
Table 3—Dominated Plan Choice Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominated plan analysis</th>
<th>$t_1$ Dominated stay</th>
<th>$t_1$ Dominated switch</th>
<th>$t_2$ Dominated stay</th>
<th>$t_2$ Dominated switch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum money lost$^a$</td>
<td>$374</td>
<td>$453</td>
<td>$396</td>
<td>$306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$PPO_{250}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>44 (72%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>103 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$PPO_{750}$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any HMO</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13 (21%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA $t_1$</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA $t_2$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental switch $t_1$</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental switch $t_2$</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean)</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income tier (mean)$^b$</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant. manager</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (percent)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (percent)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All plan analysis</td>
<td>$PPO_{250}$ stay $t_1$</td>
<td>$PPO_{250}$ switch $t_1$</td>
<td>All plans stay $t_1$</td>
<td>All plans switch $t_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>1,626</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>2,786</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA $t_1$ enrollee</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental switch</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean)</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income tier (mean)$^b$</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant. manager</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single (percent)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (percent)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: This top panel in this table profiles the choices and demographics of the employees enrolled in $PPO_{250}$ at $t_0$ who (i) continue to enroll in a firm plan in $t_1$ and (ii) have $PPO_{250}$ become dominated for them at $t_1$. The majority of these employees (498 out of 559 (89 percent) remain in $PPO_{250}$ even after it becomes dominated by $PPO_{250}$ with 378 of 504 (25 percent) still remaining in this plan at $t_2$. People who do switch are more likely to exhibit a pattern of active choice behavior in general as evidenced by their higher FSA enrollments and level of dental plan switching. Apart from this, these populations are similar though switchers in this group are slightly younger. The bottom panel studies the profiles of those who switch at $t_1$ and those who don’t for the two groups of (i) $PPO_{250}$ enrollees at $t_0$ and (ii) the entire universe of PPO plan enrollees present in $t_0$ and $t_1$. This reveals a similar pattern of active decision making as switchers in these populations are also more likely to enroll in FSAs and switch dental plans.
Health Insurance: Dominated Plan Choices

- Everyone has the option to switch to PPO250
- But, only 11% of those who chose PPO500 in year 0 switch to PPO250
- 89% remain in dominated plan!
- Leave at least $374 per family on the table
- Those who switched would have left more money on the table ($453)
  - Some evidence of rationality
- Is this inertia bad?
  - Significant evidence that PPO 250 had much higher cost enrollees
    - This was why they increased the price...
  - Inertia kept many healthy people enrolled in the more generous 250 deductible plan
    - Lowers prices of the more generous policy
### Table 4—Adverse Selection and Employee Costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final sample total expenses</th>
<th>$PPO_ \text{-1}$</th>
<th>$PPO_{250}$</th>
<th>$PPO_{300}$</th>
<th>$PPO_{1200}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$t_{-1}$ total expenses ($)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$ employees (mean family size)</td>
<td>2,022 (2.24)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (median)</td>
<td>13,331 (4,916)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th percentile</td>
<td>1,257</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th percentile</td>
<td>13,022</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t_0$</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,328 (2.18)</td>
<td>414 (2.20)</td>
<td>280 (2.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$ (mean family size)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>16,976 (6,628)</td>
<td>6,151 (2.244)</td>
<td>6,742 (2.958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (median)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2,041</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th percentile</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>16,135</td>
<td>6,989</td>
<td>8,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th percentile</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t_1$</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,244 (2.19)</td>
<td>546 (2.19)</td>
<td>232 (2.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$ (mean family size)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17,270 (6,651)</td>
<td>7,759 (2,659)</td>
<td>6,008 (2,815)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (median)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2,041</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th percentile</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>16,707</td>
<td>8,588</td>
<td>7,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th percentile</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual category expenses (dollars)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pharmacy</th>
<th>$973$</th>
<th>$1,420$</th>
<th>$586$</th>
<th>$388$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental health ($&gt;0$)</th>
<th>$2,401$</th>
<th>$2,228$</th>
<th>$1,744$</th>
<th>$2,134$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1,260</td>
<td>1,211</td>
<td>1,243</td>
<td>924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hospital/physician</th>
<th>$4,588$</th>
<th>$5,772$</th>
<th>$2,537$</th>
<th>$2,722$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>356</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** This table investigates the extent of adverse selection across PPO options after the $t_0$ menu change for those in the final estimation sample. All individuals in this sample were enrolled in $PPO_{-1}$ in $t_{-1}$ and continue to be enrolled in some plan at the firm for the following two years. The numbers in the table for all choices represent $t_{-1}$ total claims in dollars so that these costs can proxy for health risk without being confounded by moral hazard ($t_0$ and $t_1$ cost differences could be the result of selection or moral hazard). The table reveals that those who choose $PPO_{250}$ have much higher expenditures at $t_{-1}$ than those who choose the other two plans, implying substantial selection on observables in the vein of Finkelstein and Poterba (2006). The bottom panel presents a breakdown of these costs according to our cost model expenditure category.
Handel (2013): Nudging versus Adverse Selection

- Develops model with inertia (switching costs) to explain why only 11% switched
- Uses model to study impact of reducing inertia
- Results suggest adverse selection would increase
- Would overall reduce welfare despite improving individual choices
1. General Model of Bias: Information versus Understanding

2. Imperfect Take Up of Benefits: The Case of EITC

3. Inertia in Health Insurance

4. Unemployment and Job Search

5. Savings

6. Unsolicited Thoughts
Large literature documenting behavioral anomalies in job search and unemployment contexts

Discuss two papers here:


Spinnewijn (2015): Unemployment Duration Expectations

![Histogram showing the frequency of actual minus expected number of weeks unemployed, with bars for complete spells and complete spells with incomplete spells. The x-axis represents the difference in weeks, ranging from -50 to 50 weeks. The y-axis represents the frequency, ranging from 0 to 200.]
On average, beliefs are 6.8 weeks less than actual experience

Implications of biased beliefs:
- People may under-search?
- Under-save?
- Deplete savings too quickly during unemployment?
  - Explain why consumption drops at benefit exhaustion in Ganong and Noel (2016)?

Optimal policy implications:
- Increase benefits during unemployment? Why?
Provide evidence of reference-dependent job search

Follow model of Koszegi and Rabin (2006) with loss aversion:

\[
  u(c|r) = \nu(c) + \eta_{gain} 1 \{ c \geq r \} [\nu(c) - \nu(r)] + \eta_{loss} 1 \{ c < r \} [\nu(c) - \nu(r)] - \psi(e)
\]

where \( e \) is search effort and

\[
  r = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{k=t-N}^{t-1} y_k
\]

is the average income in the past \( N \) periods.
Della Vigna et al. (2016)

- Model predicts:
  - Upon unemployment onset, search hard because consumption falls below reference point
  - But, effort declines throughout the spell as the reference point adjusts
  - Search effort rises in anticipation of a future benefit cut or exhaustion

- Exploit data from Hungary
  - Change in benefit formula
  - Compare groups who entered just before vs. after the reform
Figure II: Institutional Setting: Change in Benefit Path and Sample Periods

(a) Benefit Path Change, Main Sample
Figure I: Model Simulations of the Standard and the Reference-Dependent model

Notes: Panel (a) shows two benefit regimes, both of them having a step-down benefit system. After the first step benefits are higher in the regime represented by the circled blue line than in the regime represented by the red dashed line. After the second step benefits drop to the same level. Panel (b) shows the hazard rates predicted by the standard model (with \( k = 130, \gamma = 0.2, w = 555, \delta = 0.99 \)) while Panel (c) the prediction of the reference-dependent model (with \( k = 130, \gamma = 0.2, w = 555, \delta = 0.99, \lambda = 3, N = 10 \) (150 days)).
Figure III: Empirical Hazard and Survival Rates under the Old and the New Benefit Schedule

(a) Empirical hazard rates
Figure IX: Out-of-sample Performance of Models

(a) Out-of-sample predictions of models for unemployment system 2 (after week of first claimed benefits)
Evidence that people are over-optimistic about unemployment duration

- Stated vs. true beliefs?

Evidence of spike in job search around drops in benefits

- Consistent with reference dependent preferences

Implications for optimal UI?
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6. Unsolicited Thoughts
Large debate about whether people are saving “enough” for retirement

  - Yes, argues structural model + savings suggests they are (or have been)
  - But, very sensitive to structural assumptions

General concern: growing switch from pensions to 401Ks
  - Require individuals to save on their own
  - Growing use of tax dollars: $100B per year on subsidies for 401Ks and IRAs (JCT, 2012)
Significant evidence that default options in 401K plans affect savings behavior

Significant evidence that providing tax incentives for 401K contributions increases investments in those assets
- Poterba, Venti, Wise (AER, 1994; JEP 1996)

Given behavioral biases, are tax incentives the best way to increase savings?
- Chetty, Friedman, Leth-Petersen, Nielsen, Olsen (2014)
  - Use administrative wealth data for all Danish households
  - Begin by studying policy that changed retirement savings subsidy

Note: Subsequent slides re-produced from Chetty (2015, AEA Ely Lecture)
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions

Control Group
Subsidy unchanged

Treatment Group
Retirement subsidy reduced by 12 cents per dollar in 1999

Note: $1 \equiv 6$ DKr
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions

Pension Contribution (DKr) vs. Income (DKr 1000s)

Data points for 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 are shown in different line styles and markers.
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions

Pension Contribution (DKr) vs. Income (DKr 1000s)
Impact of 1999 Pension Subsidy Reduction On Pension Contributions
Impact of 1999 Capital Pension Subsidy Reduction on Distribution of Capital Pension Contributions for Prior Contributors
Impact of 1999 Capital Pension Subsidy Reduction on Distribution of Capital Pension Contributions for Prior Contributors
Change in Marginal Propensity to Save in Retirement vs. Non-Retirement Accounts at Top Tax Cutoff by Year

Crowd-out: $\phi_L = 120\%$ (59%)
Effect of Tax Subsidies

- Aggregate reduction is driven by 19% of treated households who entirely stop contributing to pensions
  - Remaining 81% do not change retirement contributions at all
  - Consistent with inattention model (Carroll et al. (2009, QJE))

- 90% of the reduction in retirement contributions is offset by more saving in non-retirement accounts
  - Crowd out \(\rightarrow\) smaller impact on total savings
  - $1 of tax subsidy generates 1 cent increase in total savings
Defaults

- Compare to impact of change in defaults

- Chetty et al (2013) study people switching firms with an opt-in versus an opt-out retirement savings program in the Danish data

- Key question: do defaults increase total savings or just a shift in assets?
  - Track savings around job changes, exploiting variation in employers’ retirement plans
  - If you move to a firm where employers contribute more to retirement savings, do you offset this with decreased savings?
Event Study around Switches to Firm with >3% Increase in Employer Pension Rate

Individuals with Positive Pension Contributions or Savings Prior to Switch

$\Delta$ Employer Pensions = 5.64
Event Study around Switches to Firm with >3% Increase in Employer Pension Rate

Individuals with Positive Pension Contributions or Savings Prior to Switch

\[ \Delta \text{Employer Pensions} = 5.64 \]

\[ \Delta \text{Individual Pensions} = -0.56 \]
Event Study around Switches to Firm with >3% Increase in Employer Pension Rate

Individuals with Positive Pension Contributions or Savings Prior to Switch

\[ \Delta \text{Employer Pensions} = 5.64 \]

\[ \Delta \text{Taxable Savings} = 0.02 \]
Approximately 85% of individuals respond passively to changes in employer contributions

They simply increase their savings
- Savings increase is permanent and leads to increased wealth at retirement

Suggests default policies can significantly increase savings rates for larger share of the population

And potentially cost less too...
Often, consumers don’t consider all relevant options when making decisions

- E.g. Handel evidence on switching costs. Is this a true “cost” of switching or just an “inattention” to the price of the other good?

- How can we identify what people consider? And their willingness to pay conditional on considering?

- Abaluck and Adams: think about Slutsky symmetry

- Slutsky: Compensated $100 increase in price of good 1 should be equivalent to compensated $100 decrease in price of all rival goods besides good 1

- Abaluck and Adams: Not true if people didn’t consider good 1.
To illustrate, consider an insurance plan choice between 0 and 1.

Suppose 0 is the default option and suppose individuals choose default unless it becomes sufficiently unattractive that it motivates attention on other goods. I.e. the attention on other goods is a function of the price of good 0.

This implies that consumers only care about the price of good 0, not the price difference between good 0 and good 1.

Paper shows one can identify the probability of considering good 1 conditional on price of good 0 separately from violations of Slutsky symmetry.
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Thoughts on Research Proposals

Some common themes
- Interests in fiscal externalities
  - Interest in COVID
  - Interest in long-run impacts of policies
  - I learned some things about new tax policies

Many of you are grappling with: Is this question worth pursuing?

Every research project takes years
  - When should you pursue the project?
Thoughts on “Is it worth pursuing”?

- Some things you’ll hear that limit upside of knowledge generation:
  - One-sided projects
  - Same variation of previous paper
  - Program not large enough to be of ’general interest’
Thoughts on “Is it worth pursuing”? 

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  - Program not large enough to be of ’general interest’

- My take:
  - Start with a puzzle (and sometimes you have to find your puzzle)
  - Don’t require massive data acquisition before first-analysis (unless it's a two-sided question and you care)
  - If you’re genuinely interested in a project – there’s no substitute for this!
  - One-sided projects can still be ok

As you go, your project idea always evolves...let it! Iterate between empirics, theory, and ideas

Idea <–> Theory <–> Empirics

Papers never follow a linear path (e.g. ask me about my JMP / Movers paper w Raj / etc).

The “scientific method” is not about testing hypotheses in data, but rather a series of learning opportunities as you explore data.
Thoughts on “Is it worth pursuing”?  

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  - Idea <-- Theory <-- Empirics  
  - Papers never follow a linear path (e.g. ask me about my JMP / Movers paper w Raj / etc).  
    - The “scientific method” is not about testing hypotheses in data, but rather a series of learning opportunities as you explore data.
Stay curious

Professors always joke that undergrads come up with better ideas than grad students
Don’t be afraid to be creative – crazy questions are ok
Don’t get caught up in the literature / what’s been done
  But once you have a “good” idea, read deeply in that literature and figure out what has been done, then iterate with your idea

Choose topics that you are passionate about

  Researching those topics isn’t work!
  Will be easier to convince others its interesting if you think it is
After classes end in 2nd year, fewer opportunities for “discipline” – here’s how I wish I’d applied mine:

- Write good code and document your exploratory results in comments in your code
- When getting a dataset, first thing to do is open it up and look at it
  - Spend an hour to make sure the data looks reasonable
- It’s always worth writing out a model to explain your patterns / derive your regression equations
  - Not always clear it goes in the paper but still useful regardless
Most common question I am asked: How can I get access to US Tax / Census data?

My response:
- Can your question be asked without tax data? e.g. can you use less-restricted census data / FSRDC
- Do you have power? If you’re using cross-state variation, you’re ruining most of the value of population data
- Can you do preliminary analysis using public data to have a sense of whether your pattern is there?

If you have a project worth pushing for census / tax data, here are the paths:
- If you can only use Census data, submit an FSRDC application
- Submit to the SOI call for proposals
- Collaborate with a researcher at the Office of Tax Analysis at Treasury or the Joint Committee for Taxation (both of whom have access to the data).
- Ask for advice from folks with access, but remember many (like me) may be prevented from working on your project idea because it requires formal approval
Other Data Partners

- Other countries’ admin data is often less restrictive:
  - Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France...

- Firms have an enormous amount of information
  - Generally under-explored in research:
    - Transactions / sales information
    - HR information
    - Search / website info

- Other good sources for merging to gain new outcomes:
  - Voterfiles (contains race/demographics)
  - credit reports / court records
Graduate school has far too few opportunities to present
- Take each presentation seriously, not just as feedback on your work but as an opportunity to improve your skills at presenting
- But don’t let the stress overwhelm you – everyone gets stressed in presentations (including me) but the hope is you can translate it into productive energy

Practice your presentations (I have never given a seminar that I have not practiced at least 10 times through)
- Think through how you want to make your arguments to the listener
- Practice transitions between slides
- Know your slides and the details
- Put some effort into slide construction – often one graph can “make” a paper
- More practice ex-ante can also reduce stress

Appreciate feedback
- You are not your paper
Some Topics I Find Interesting

1. Desirability of place-based versus national policy
2. Endogeneity of public policies (i.e., political economy) – what are we missing by not thinking about political economy constraints?
3. Why don’t people take up social benefits? (and should we incentivize them to?)
4. What other markets are missing because of private information and what are the welfare implications? (Credit? Reclassification risk? Income insurance?)
5. Career trajectories within the firm
6. Competition in insurance markets – what’s the equilibrium? [Note: I’ve given up trying to think this can be solved...]
7. Government versus markets – should the govt, e.g., provide schooling directly or fund charter schools?
8. Endogenous preferences and impact on PF / role of policy (MVPF of being a jerk? Altruism? Endogenous altruism? Endogenous reductions in gender bias or racism?)
9. The economic incidence of COVID