Modern Monetary Policy Regimes: Mandate, Independence, and Accountability

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1. Mandate

Possible objectives for monetary policy: What can monetary policy achieve?

- Long run
  - Nominal variables (price level, inflation, exchange rates...): Level and variability
  - Real variables (output, employment, unemployment, output gap, resource utilization, ...):
  - Not levels, only variability
  - Possible tradeoff between variability of real and nominal variables
  - Imperfect control

Possible objectives for monetary policy: What can monetary policy achieve?

- Short run
  - Nominal variables: Permanent impact
  - Real variables: Temporary impact
  - Lags: Variable, 1-2 years
  - Uncertainty:
    - Current state of the economy
    - Future effect on real and nominal variables of given monetary policy action
    - Forecasts!

Suitable objectives for monetary policy: What should monetary policy try to achieve?

- Nominal stability
  - “Price stability”: Low and stable inflation
  - Costs of high inflation
    - High inflation variability → more uncertainty in economic decisions
    - Distortions (taxes, demand for financial services, transactions costs, ...)
    - Arbitrary redistributions (owners vs. renters, borrowers vs. lenders, ...)

- Real stability
  - Stable resource utilization
  - “Flexible inflation targeting”: Low and stable inflation as well as stable resource utilization
  - Reasonable compromise between stable inflation and stable resource utilization
Flexible inflation targeting

Characteristics:
1. Numerical inflation target
2. “Forecast targeting”: Setting the interest rate (an interest-rate path) such that forecasts of inflation and resource utilization “look good”
3. A high degree of transparency and accountability

Numerical inflation target

- Target and index specified by government, parliament, or central bank
  - Government: NZ, Canada, UK, Australia, Norway
  - Central bank: Euro area, Sweden
- Pros and cons
  - Government/parliament commitment to inflation target
  - Target level and index not suitable as election issue
  - Index and level of target arguably a technical question

2. Independence

- Avoids short-run interference by governments/parliaments: Political business cycle
- Avoids “inflation bias”
- Allows longer horizon in monetary policy
- Emphasizes responsibility for fulfilling mandate

2. Independence

- Several dimensions of independence
  - Functional, institutional, personal, financial
  - Goal vs. instrument
  - Formal (legal) vs. informal (actual)

2. Independence

- Degree of independence varies across countries
- Norges Bank Watch 2002: “Monetary policy among the best in the world; institutional framework among the worst in the world”
- Informal independence even if not formal
- Safer with formal independence
3. Accountability

- Democracy: Independence requires accountability (Blinder)
- Efficiency: Accountability strengthens CB incentives to fulfill mandate
- Accountability requires transparency

Transparency

- Strengthens accountability
  - Improves discussion and evaluation of monetary policy
  - Strengthens CB incentives
- Improves efficiency of monetary policy
  - More effective “management of expectations”
  - Publishing interest-rate forecasts affects interest-rate expectations

Transparency

- Degree of transparency varies across countries
  - Inflation target, stabilization of resource utilization
  - CB forecasts, analysis, motivation for decisions (Monetary Policy Reports)
  - Analysis of outcomes: Unanticipated shocks, etc.
  - Alternative scenarios (interest rates, shocks, international developments, …)
  - Forecasts of output, output gap, resource utilization
  - Interest-rate forecasts (NZ, Norway, Sweden, …)
  - Attributed (Sweden) vs. nonattributed minutes

Possible improvements:

- Interest-rate forecasts (optimal interest-rate plans)
- Resource-utilization stabilization
  - Weight relative to inflation stabilization
  - Role in decision process
  - Forecasts of potential output and output gap
- Explicit loss functions and explicit optimal policy

Accountability in practice

- Current discussion by experts and interested parties in media, reports, conferences, etc.
- Parliaments and governments: Evaluation of past policy, not interference in current policy
  - Respect independence
- Hearings in Parliaments
  - Avoid superficial political points
  - Expert assistance, evaluation reports, questions
  - Submissions from interested parties

Accountability in practice

- Official evaluations by experts
  - New Zealand 2001
  - Sweden 2007,…
- Independent evaluations (could be sponsored by CB/Government)
  - Norges Bank Watch
  - Annual conference (ECB Watchers’ Conference, US Monetary Policy Forum)
**Accountability in practice**

- Evaluation of monetary policy: Difficulties
  - Lags (1-2 years), uncertainty
  - Current inflation affected by policy about 2 years ago
  - Current inflation on target
    - Policy right 2 years ago, unanticipated shocks small or cancel
    - Policy wrong 2 years ago, unanticipated shocks compensate (luck)
  - Current inflation off target
    - Policy right 2 years ago, unanticipated shocks explain deviation
    - Policy wrong 2 years ago, unanticipated shocks don’t compensate
  - Ex post evaluation difficult: Must identify shocks to judge policy

- Ex ante evaluation of decisions better
  - Evaluate decision given info at the time of decision
  - Requires transparency: CB info at the time
  - Compare w/ other forecasts/policy recommendations at the time

**Modern monetary policy regimes**

- Mandate, independence, accountability
- Flexible inflation targeting
  - Works very well in many countries
- Room for further improvements of transparency and accountability
- Accountability in practice, evaluations
- We learn more from some variety across countries