

LECTURE 35: FISCAL POLICY II

In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But, in practice, there is.
—Unknown

I. Crowding Out

- a. When the government increases its spending, it must fund that spending somehow. We discussed how increasing spending can't be funded with taxes because there'd be no net effect (AD will shift right because of the spending but will shift back left because of the taxes).
- b. The danger is what we call *crowding out*—an increase in government spending is offset by a decrease in private spending.
- c. So the government funds such spending with borrowing, thus called we call it deficit spending. But this also comes with a danger of crowding out. The effect is twofold.
 - i. As the government borrows, it uses savings that would have gone to private-sector investment. The government might build a bridge, but as a result there's one less factory. The government is simply substituting one kind of spending or investment for another.
 - ii. As the government borrows, it puts upward pressure on interest rates which causes more saving (and thus less consumption) and less private-sector borrowing.
 - iii. Crowding out private-sector spending is less of an issue during a recession because people are already reluctant to invest and spend. The money in the banks is just sitting there, doing nothing. So the government lays claim to it.

II. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act In Practice

- a. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was an \$800 billion stimulus package passed in 2009. It set out to do what all stimulus packages set out to do: put people back to work and increase GDP.
 - i. It includes money to food banks, elderly care, health research, and many other places.
- b. The big issue during recessions is unemployment. In 2011, Garrett Jones and Daniel Rothschild completed a study of the ARRA to

determine where the money went and the effect it had.¹ We'll focus on their employment results.²

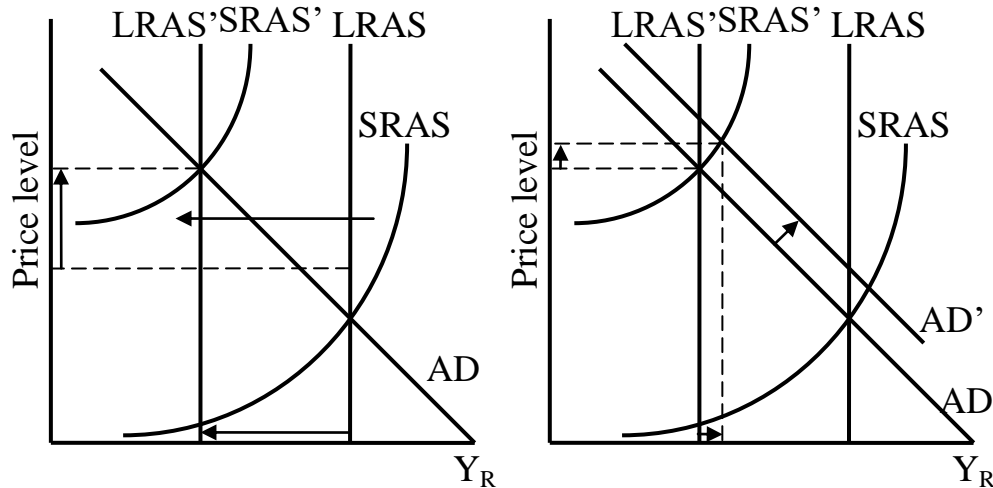
- c. The companies that benefited from the stimulus were busy despite the recession. This is because the bureaucracies usually went to trusted firms, firms they typically work with (to avoid the potential of a scandal). Such firms are already busy.
- d. Moreover, Jones and Rothschild found 42% of the workers hired because of the stimulus came from the unemployed; 47% came from other jobs.
 - i. Now for some context: in normal economic circumstances in the United States, about half of the people hired come from unemployment.
 - ii. Shouldn't it be easier to hire workers from unemployment when the economy's weak? The stimulus apparently had a harder time.
 - iii. Why did it have a hard time? Because a lot of the money went to high-skilled sectors such as engineers and medical researchers. Of the Jones/Rothschild survey respondents, half had at least bachelor's degree and one-fourth had a graduate degree.
 - iv. The data suggests there was labor-market tightness. Qualified people were pretty hard to find after the recession; not something you'd expect. If the stimulus was well-targeted, it should have been easy to find qualified people.
- e. You can quibble with the results—the surveys might have had some systemic bias—but the underlying idea rings true: there was a lot of crowding out.
 - i. Interestingly, this is a different form of crowding out. It's not a matter of government borrowing crowding out private-sector borrowing (demand-side crowding out). Here, it's the government hiring people who would otherwise be hired by the private sector (supply-side crowding out). But the basic idea is the same.

III. Fiscal Policy and Real Shocks

- a. Shifts in LRAS (real shocks) typically cause SRAS to shift with it.
 - i. Note the reverse is not true: if input prices change, SRAS will shift but LRAS won't shift.

¹ <http://mercatus.org/publication/did-stimulus-dollars-hire-unemployed>

² For more information about the study, see http://www.econtalk.org/archives/2011/09/garett_jones_on_1.html



b. As this illustrates, deficit spending can't handle real shocks well. You'll only get crowding out. You must address the root of the problem.

IV. A matter of timing

- a. Drops in AD are not permanent; the economy will recover if the government does nothing. Fiscal policy is good for assuaging the pain of a recession in the meantime.
- b. Automatic/built-in stabilizers happen immediately, but they are relatively small to what needs to be done. Law makers must act.
- c. But in practice, it takes time for fiscal policy to take effect. It faces several different lags:
 - i. Recognition lag—It takes times to identify a problem
 - ii. Legislative lag—The government must propose and pass a plan
 - iii. Implementation lag—Bureaucracies must implement the plan
 - iv. Effectiveness lag—It takes time for the plan to work
- d. In practice, it can take years for the policy to actually have an effect on the economy. By then the crisis might have already passed and now the additional spending creates problems rather than solves them.
 - i. As President Obama would later say, "There's no such thing as shovel-ready projects."³

³ <http://www.wnyc.org/story/286037-shovel-ready-projects-obama-admits-theres-no-such-thing/>