

Do fiscal rules matter? A survey on recent evidence

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Abstract

Fiscal rules are argued to be important for sound and sustainable fiscal policies and have been increasingly adopted over the last 20 years. However, as increased fiscal pressure and fiscal risks urge countries to address the public debt legacy left by recent economic crises, fiscal rules come under greater scrutiny. To inform the debate on fiscal frameworks, this paper presents a comprehensive survey of the empirical literature on the impact of fiscal rules. In particular, we discuss the recent empirical literature that investigates the impact of fiscal rules on various elements related to fiscal performance and beyond. Our survey finds that fiscal rules are associated with improved fiscal performance as approximated by improved budget balances, lower debt and lower public spending volatility. Furthermore, empirical research finds that fiscal rules are related to more accurate budget forecasts and improved sovereign bond ratings. From a macroeconomic perspective, well-designed fiscal rules do not principally undermine public investment and do not increase pro-cyclicality in fiscal-policy making. These results, however, also depend on the broader economic and institutional context. Moreover, there is emerging literature that links fiscal rules to broader outcomes, such as income distribution and political polarisation. We discuss methodological challenges related to identification and point to avenues for future research.

Keywords: Fiscal rules, independent fiscal institutions, public debt, fiscal policy, fiscal sustainability

JEL Code: E61, E62, H1, H6

Kurzfassung

Fiskalregeln gelten als wichtiges Instrument für eine solide und nachhaltige Finanzpolitik und wurden in den vergangenen 20 Jahren in einer Vielzahl von Staaten eingeführt. Der wachsende Druck auf und steigende Risiken für die öffentlichen Haushalte setzen die Staaten jedoch unter Zugzwang, gegen die aus den jüngeren Krisen angehäufte Staatsverschuldung vorzugehen. Dies stellt auch Fiskalregeln auf den Prüfstand. Das vorliegende Papier ist ein Beitrag zur Debatte über die Effektivität von Fiskalregelwerken und bietet einen umfassenden Überblick über die empirische Literatur zur Wirkung von Fiskalregeln. Im Fokus stehen die jüngeren empirischen Arbeiten, welche die Wirkung von Fiskalregeln auf die Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen und darüber hinaus untersuchen. Der Literaturüberblick stellt fest, dass Fiskalregeln mit ausgeglicheneren Haushaltsaldi, niedrigerer Verschuldung und geringerer Ausgabenvolatilität verbunden sind. Ebenso zeigt die empirische Forschung, dass Fiskalregeln mit präziseren Budgetprognosen und vorteilhafteren Ratings für Staatsanleihen assoziiert sind. Aus makroökonomischer Sicht ist festzustellen, dass gut gestaltete Fiskalregeln öffentliche Investitionen grundsätzlich nicht untergraben oder den Hang zu einer prozyklischen Finanzpolitik verstärken. Dabei spielt jedoch der wirtschaftliche und institutionelle Kontext eine Rolle. Darüber hinaus untersuchen neuere Studien, wie Fiskalregeln auf die Einkommensverteilung oder die politische Polarisierung wirken. Der Überblick weist auf methodische Herausforderungen bezüglich der Identifikation von kausalen Zusammenhängen hin und bietet Ansatzpunkte für die weiterführende Forschung.

Résumé

Ces 20 dernières années, un nombre croissant d'États ont adopté des règles budgétaires qui sont considérées comme un aspect important d'une politique budgétaire saine et durable. Celles-ci font l'objet d'une attention accrue, car l'accentuation de la pression et des risques budgétaires incite les États à régler le problème de la dette publique héritée des crises économiques récentes. Pour éclairer le débat sur les cadres budgétaires, le présent document analyse la littérature empirique relative aux effets de ces règles et, en particulier, celle, récente, qui examine ces effets sur différents éléments liés à la performance budgétaire et au-delà. Selon cette analyse de la littérature, les règles budgétaires ont pour corollaire une meilleure performance budgétaire, à savoir des budgets mieux équilibrés, une dette moindre et des dépenses publiques moins volatiles. De plus, la recherche empirique montre que ces règles se traduisent par des prévisions budgétaires plus précises et une meilleure notation des emprunts d'État. Du point de vue macroéconomique, des règles budgétaires bien conçues n'ont pas pour conséquence première de freiner l'investissement public et n'accroissent pas la procyclicité de la politique budgétaire. Le contexte économique et institutionnel plus large entre toutefois également en ligne de compte. Par ailleurs, la littérature récente établit un lien entre les règles budgétaires et des résultats plus larges tels que la répartition des revenus et la polarisation politique. L'analyse de la littérature examine les défis méthodologiques en matière d'identification et expose les pistes envisageables pour les futurs travaux de recherche.

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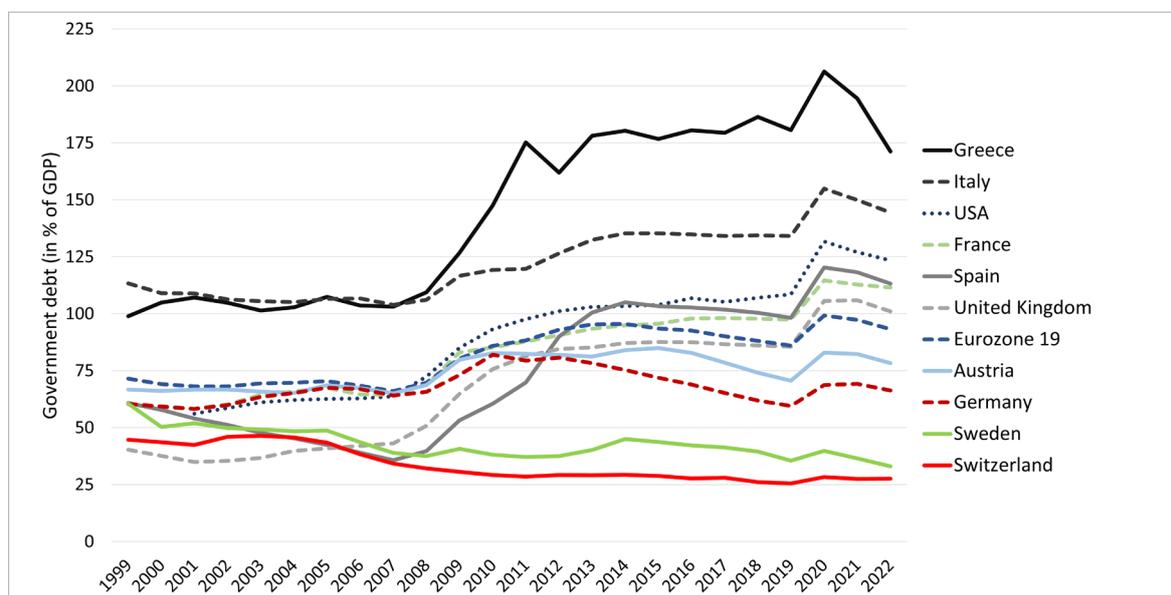
1. Introduction

Economies worldwide have been hit hard by COVID-19. To mitigate the economic consequences of this crisis, governments responded with economic policy packages of often unprecedented size, followed by countries' public debt soaring substantially. At the same time, it is also evident that public debt dynamics and levels vary across countries (Figure 1).

Fiscal rules play an important role for the conduct of sound and sustainable fiscal policies and eventually for the resilience of public finances. In fact, fiscal rules are considered the main institutional instrument to ensure the achievement of these objectives. In particular, they are argued to discipline politicians' public spending behaviour, create confidence for economic agents and allow to build up fiscal buffers for economic shocks.

However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries adapted their fiscal frameworks, including the activation of escape clauses or the temporary suspension of fiscal rules (e.g., Davoodi et al., 2022a). With increased fiscal pressure and fiscal risks, fiscal frameworks come under greater scrutiny, as countries need to balance economic and fiscal recovery efforts with the public debt legacy. In parallel, countries will continue to face spending pressure from structural challenges, such as ageing, health care, defence and the energy and climate transition. In other words, crisis events and structural pressures put the resilience of fiscal frameworks to a test.

Figure 1: Government debt in selected OECD countries, 1999–2022



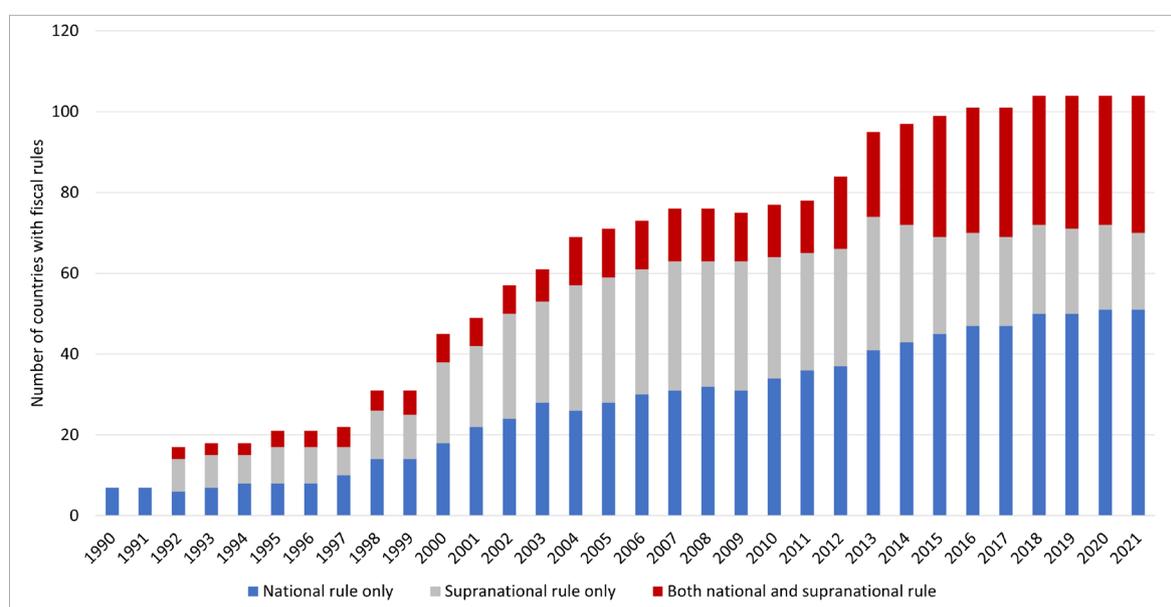
Source: OECD.

A case in point is the ongoing debate on the reform of the EU fiscal framework that has been established around 25 years ago and its reinstatement after the activation of the general escape clause in 2020. Another prominent example of fiscal rules at the national level is the introduction of the debt brake in Switzerland 20 years ago. Notably, this fiscal rule was supported by a large majority of voters in a constitutional popular vote and served as a blueprint for the German debt brake and for the reinforcement of the EU fiscal framework after the global financial crisis.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, a growing number of countries have introduced a rules-based framework for the conduct of fiscal policy, totalling up to over 100 countries by 2021 (Figure 2). Although countries differ in the type and number of fiscal rules they apply, a frequent combination is a debt rule, often supported by operational rules, such as a budget balance rule or an expenditure rule. The increasing number of countries with experience in conducting fiscal policy guided by fiscal rules and the economic policy challenges ahead invite a comprehensive assessment of the empirical evidence on their impacts.

Figure 2: Adoption of fiscal rules since 1990



Source: IMF Fiscal Rules Dataset – 1985–2021; Davoodi et al. (2022b).

Notes: Number of countries with at least one fiscal rule. 53 countries are subject to supranational rules that often complement national fiscal rules. These include 27 EU member states, 6 in Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU), 8 in West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), 6 in Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), and 6 in East Africa Economic and Monetary Community.

To promote evidence-based policy making, this review begins by studying the relationship between fiscal rules and fiscal performance. Fiscal performance is primarily measured by changes in budget balances, public revenue or spending and government debt. The review includes studies that address further dimensions of fiscal performance, for instance, the fiscal rules' impact on the accuracy of budgetary forecasts, sovereign bond ratings, public investment and pro-cyclicality in fiscal policies. Moreover, the review describes emerging contributions that go beyond fiscal performance, relating fiscal rules to broader political outcomes. A comprehensive survey on the various dimensions of the impact of fiscal rules is so far lacking in the literature. Earlier or more specific reviews are presented by Feld and Reuter (2017), by Burret and Feld (2014) with a focus on the subnational level in the United States and Switzerland and by Blesse et al. (2023) on fiscal rules and public investment.

The present review covers academic publications and draws on recent work by major international organisations. The review includes primarily empirical analyses that study fiscal rules at the national level, with a focus on OECD or EU economies. For EU countries, this often coincides with evidence

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on the EU fiscal framework. We selectively refer to evidence from the subnational level. A case in point are Swiss cantons with a long tradition of fiscal rules and decentralised fiscal autonomy. With a view to policy advice, the review presents a non-technical discussion of the studies' key results. It points to the underlying data and highlights empirical methods as well as their limitations.

The review shows that the empirical literature on fiscal rules has become differentiated, presenting analysis on several dimensions of effectiveness. The literature has made substantial progress in underpinning the role of fiscal rules in shaping fiscal performance.

First, there is relatively broad-based evidence that fiscal rules are associated with improved fiscal performance as approximated by budget balances, public revenues and spending, public spending volatility and government debt (e.g., Fall et al., 2015; Badinger and Reuter, 2017; Caselli and Reynaud, 2020). Recent empirical contributions further differentiate the impact of fiscal rules along their type and design. Second, there is clear-cut evidence that fiscal rules are related to more accurate budget forecasts, being important for fiscal planning and fiscal credibility (e.g., Luechinger and Schaltegger, 2013; Picchio and Santolini, 2020). Another strand of the literature provides evidence for the beneficial impact that fiscal rules have on sovereign bond ratings, being crucial for financial markets' assessments. In particular, strict fiscal rules appear to have an effect, particularly under uncertain financial market conditions (e.g., Feld et al., 2017; Thornton and Vasilakis, 2017; Afonso and Jalles, 2019). Another line of empirical research suggests that fiscal rules do not principally hamper public investment. However, public investment can be put at risk, if the design of fiscal rules is overly rigid, especially during periods of fiscal consolidation (e.g., Delgado-Téllez et al., 2021; Ardanaz et al., 2021; Vinturis, 2022). Moreover, the evidence shows that fiscal rules do not increase pro-cyclicality in fiscal policy making. Evidence from large country samples suggests that the design of fiscal rules matters and the impact of fiscal rules depends on the economic and institutional context (e.g., Combes et al., 2017; Guerguil et al., 2017; Reuter et al., 2022).

Extending the perspective to further elements of fiscal frameworks, there is a growing body of research on the role of independent fiscal institutions (IFI). IFIs are considered to complement fiscal rules. In fact, empirical studies find that well-designed IFIs complement fiscal rules and are associated with improved fiscal balances and less pro-cyclical fiscal policies. In particular, countries where IFIs assess forecasts and monitor fiscal rules are successful in delivering more accurate forecasts and achieve better compliance with fiscal rules (e.g., Debrun and Kinda, 2017; Beetsma et al., 2019; Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis, 2022).

In light of the experiences with fiscal consolidations following the global financial crisis, there is emerging work on the potential negative side effects that fiscal rules may have on inequality (Hartwig and Sturm, 2019), political polarisation (Aaskoven, 2020) and political selection (Gamaerio and Trombetta, 2023). However, this research is in its infancy.

The empirical literature suggests that fiscal rules work as a commitment device and foster fiscal performance. Still, there is disagreement on whether fiscal rules have a causal effect on constraining fiscal policies. From a methodological perspective, a positive relationship between fiscal rules and fiscal performance does not necessarily imply causality. It may simply reflect the fact that governments that are more concerned with sound fiscal policies and fiscal sustainability are also more likely to introduce and implement fiscal rules. Or, it may also reflect that governments are

more likely to implement rules when they expect them to be achievable, such as when the economy and public finances are already expected to naturally recover following a crisis.

In this context, Heinemann et al. (2018) provide a first meta-regression analysis covering 30 studies on the relationship between fiscal rules and fiscal performance. Their evidence points to a constraining effect of fiscal rules on budgetary aggregates. However, this result is weakened as their analysis reveals an upward bias if endogeneity concerns are not explicitly taken into account. In other words, empirical results tend to overestimate the impact of fiscal rules. Similar concerns matter when studying the interaction of fiscal rules with independent fiscal institutions and the quality of the broader institutional context. To mitigate these concerns, recent empirical studies on fiscal rules use cutting-edge empirical methods to identify causality, including difference-in-differences, instrumental variables, quasi-natural experiments and propensity scores-matching.

A key question is which types of fiscal rules are most effective and in which institutional context. Asatryan et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of anchoring fiscal rules at the constitutional level to increase credibility and consequently improve fiscal performance. As to the type of fiscal rules, the empirical evidence finds mostly budget balance rules and expenditure rules to be effective. As to the design of fiscal rules, research suggests that well-designed fiscal rules improve fiscal performance, protect public investment from being undermined and reduce the pro-cyclical bias in fiscal policy making. Key design features involve a strong legal basis, binding enforcement and flexibility provisions that take into account the economic cycle. As to the institutional context, there is promising work on the interaction of fiscal rules and the broader institutional context. For instance, this research suggests that fiscal rules and government effectiveness work as institutional complements (Bergman and Hutchison, 2015) for reducing fiscal pro-cyclicality and – above a certain threshold of institutional quality – as institutional substitutes for ensuring fiscal sustainability (Bergman et al., 2016). In a similar vein, Gootjes and de Haan (2022b) suggest that a minimum level of fiscal transparency is needed for fiscal rules to be effective. Closely related, there is innovative research that studies the determinants of compliance with fiscal rules, highlighting the importance of political and economic factors (e.g., Reuter, 2019; Larch et al., 2023).

The present review informs the policy debate on more resilient public finances in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. A case in point is the ongoing debate on the reform of the EU fiscal framework. This discussion demonstrates the importance of (i) reducing complexity of fiscal frameworks to increase ownership and enforceability, while safeguarding their flexibility to ensure counter-cyclical policies, and (ii) a stronger medium to long-term perspective to ensure debt sustainability (see e.g., European Commission, 2021, Cuerpo et al., 2022). The review also informs the policy debate more generally: It indicates that there are good reasons to keep well-designed fiscal rules unchanged even though there appear to be ever more areas for policy action, including demands for more public spending. Moreover, while recent crises challenge the resilience of fiscal frameworks, they also provide an additional rationale for fiscal rules: Countries benefit from past compliance with fiscal rules and thus lower public debt as higher fiscal buffers enable them to respond to large future crises more forcefully.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 sets the scene briefly highlighting the deficit bias, the rationale for fiscal rules and trends in fiscal rules. Section 3 reviews the empirical evidence. Section 4 presents concluding remarks.

2. Setting the scene

Public debt levels and dynamics are very heterogeneous across OECD countries. Jorda et al. (2016) and Mauro et al. (2015) study public debt over the very long term. Jorda et al. (2016) suggest that (financial) crises have been the most important driver of rising public debt. A recent study by Bernardini and Forni (2020) supports this reasoning as it is argued that financial crises tend to be followed by a large and more prolonged increase in public debt than after other recessions. Exceptional economic crises, counter-cyclical fiscal policies and public investment peaks justify temporarily higher discretionary public spending and thus public debt. Still, there are political economy dynamics that help to explain differences in fiscal policies and public debt, most notably the deficit bias.

2.1 Deficit bias

Alongside the substantive debate about an appropriate fiscal policy, political economy considerations figure prominently among the explanations for why there is a deficit bias in fiscal policies and why governments rarely deliver on counter-cyclical fiscal policies, especially in good times (for an overview, see Alesina and Passalacqua, 2016; Yared, 2019).

A first line of reasoning is presented by Buchanan and Tullock (1962) and Brennan and Buchanan (1980). They put forward the hypothesis of fiscal illusion to explain persistent government deficits. This hypothesis states that voters overvalue current spending relative to the cost of future taxation, thus violating the intertemporal budget constraint and giving rise to a deficit bias.

But even if voters put sufficient weight on the cost of future taxation, politicians may still face incentives to overspend. For example, due to short-term re-electoral incentives and by exploiting informational advantages on fiscal policy issues vis-à-vis the voters (e.g., Alesina and Tabellini, 1990; Brender and Drazen, 2000).

A second line of reasoning stresses the distortions stemming from distributive conflicts among competing interest groups, e.g., in countries with more political polarisation and fragmentation. In response to special interests, politicians may tend to spend excessively on targeted distributive purposes, neglecting the effect on the overall tax burden to be carried by all tax payers. The aggregate result is excessive spending that undermines fiscal sustainability and potentially diverts scarce public resources from their most efficient use. The underlying mechanism is dubbed the 'common pool' problem (von Hagen and Harden, 1994).

A bias towards running public deficits can also be explained by delayed fiscal adjustment. In the wake of a negative fiscal shock, political parties representing different electoral constituencies can be entrapped in a lasting conflict over how to distribute the costs of fiscal adjustment and thus delay needed economic policy reforms (Alesina and Drazen, 1991).

Finally, current generations can have an incentive to enjoy the benefit of public expenditures while passing on the tax burden to future generations. As the latter cannot vote, their voice is not heard. As a result, government deficits and debt become an instrument of intergenerational redistribution (Cukierman and Meltzer, 1986). These dynamics tend to matter more in ageing societies (Yared, 2019).

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To address these dynamics inherent to budgetary decision making, it is considered crucial to create incentives that induce governments to recognise the entire costs and benefits of public spending over the medium to long term. This is even more the case in a monetary union where coordination failures and moral hazard incentives may contribute to negative fiscal spillovers across countries. One way to do this is to set fiscal frameworks that limit the discretion of politicians and increase fiscally responsible decision making.

Earlier political economy literature has argued that budget rules and budget procedures promote sound fiscal policy (Poterba and von Hagen, 1999). Rules and procedures include the negotiation of budgets, budget voting and amendment rules, fiscal rules and medium-term frameworks. For instance, this literature argues that a strong finance minister is able to impose sectoral budget limits via negotiations with line ministries, veto excessive spending and resist opportunism. Early empirical studies suggest, for instance, that countries with a strong finance minister, a centralised top-down budgeting and a less fragmented government display better fiscal performance (see e.g., Alesina and Perotti, 1999).

2.2 Fiscal rules

In the economic policy debate, Kopits and Symansky (1998) identify various rationales for the adoption of fiscal rules, including (i) fostering macroeconomic stability, (ii) supporting other financial policies, (iii) maintaining fiscal sustainability, (iv) avoiding negative spillovers within a currency union, and (v) ensuring the credibility of government policies over time. Schaechter et al. (2012) underline fiscal responsibility and debt sustainability by arguing that fiscal rules aim to correct distorted incentives and control pressures to overspend in good times. According to Eyraud et al. (2018), fiscal rules contribute to a government's fiscal credibility in three possible ways: (i) by tying politicians' hands, (ii) by signalling commitment to fiscal responsibility, (iii) by crystallising political consensus on fiscal responsibility across political parties. Moreover, while more frequent crises also test the resilience of fiscal frameworks, they also provide an additional rationale for fiscal rules: Countries benefit from a good track record of compliance with fiscal rules and sound public finances. It allows to build up fiscal buffers that enable to respond to large crises more forcefully (IMF, 2021).

While there are strong rationales for fiscal rules, resulting in a stronger role for the minister of finance and incentivising policy priority setting to achieve sound and sustainable fiscal policies over the medium term, overly rigid fiscal rules are considered counter-productive. This may apply when economic policies improve the fiscal stance in the long-term, even though they may entail short-term fiscal burden. This is particularly relevant in the case of fiscal rules that restrict productive public investments and thus hinder economic growth and improvements in the debt-to-GDP ratio in the medium term. Moreover, accommodating growth-friendly structural reforms with fiscal policy measures may conflict with a strict application of fiscal rules. In other words, fiscal rules may reduce incentives to carry out structural reforms.

In theoretical models with a benevolent planner, fiscal rules may prevent the conduct of optimal fiscal policies. This is the case if rules limit policy flexibility, including (i) reducing the capacity to run counter-cyclical fiscal policies, (ii) inducing overly low levels of public-goods provision and public investment (Chari et al., 1994; Stockman, 2001), or (iii) giving rise to "creative accounting"

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(Milesi-Ferretti, 2004; von Hagen and Wolff, 2006). In a recent theoretical contribution, Azzimonti et al. (2016), however, offer a more differentiated analysis of the costs (less responsive public good provision and higher volatility in tax rates) and benefits (lower debt permitting higher average levels of public goods and lower taxes) of imposing fiscal rules. Further recent theoretical studies discuss optimal design features of fiscal rules highlighting the trade-off between commitment and flexibility (e.g., Halac and Yared, 2014; Yared, 2019).

Overall, governments' decisions result from manifold constraints and incentives, including the political economy mechanisms described above. Therefore, fiscal rules may increase welfare by serving as an institutional commitment device against the mechanisms underlying the deficit bias and, thus, by contributing to sound and sustainable fiscal policy. This brief discussion shows that assessing the costs and benefits of fiscal rules is ultimately an empirical question.

2.3 Trends in fiscal rules

This section draws on the excellent work by the IMF (Davoodi et al., 2022a) and provides a brief idea on fiscal rules and how they evolve.

Since the late 1980s, a growing number of countries have introduced a rules-based framework for the conduct of fiscal policy, totalling up to over 100 countries by 2021 and led mostly by advanced economies. The adoption of fiscal rules has been often driven by exogenous factors, such as financial crises, major shocks or phases of severe economic downturns, leading to abrupt rises of public debt and putting macroeconomic stability at risk. Much in the same way, the introduction of the supranational framework preparing for the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) came as an external impulse to adopt fiscal rules.

Over the last decades, fiscal rules evolved dynamically with regard to type (Box 1) and the number of fiscal rules used (Figures 3 and 4). Frequent combinations are a debt rule supported by an operational rule such as a budget balance rule or an expenditure rule. The increase in the number of fiscal rules used is also driven by EU countries that adopted national rules along with the commonly agreed EU fiscal framework.

Box 1: Types of fiscal rules

According to the IMF, a fiscal rule is a provision (or a set of provisions) that imposes long-lasting constraints on fiscal policy. It narrows a government's discretionary scope in order to prevent short term opportunistic action that would impair sound and sustainable fiscal policies. Fiscal rules typically set numerical or pre-defined quota targets on budgetary aggregates ("numerical"); they can also be extended by obliging governments to follow certain procedures in the budgetary process. Four basic types can be distinguished:

- **Debt rules** set an explicit ceiling for public debt, typically expressed in per cent of GDP, that serves as the objective of achieving convergence to a sustainable debt level. Debt rules are easy to communicate, but do not provide short-term guidance and are partially affected by factors beyond the control of governments (e.g., interest rates).

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- **Budget balance rules** constrain the budget aggregate that primarily influences the debt ratio and are largely under government control. Such rules provide operational limits and can be specified as limits on the overall balance, primary balance, or structural or cyclically adjusted balance. Side-rules for cyclical adjustment, however, tend to be difficult to communicate and to monitor.
- **Expenditure rules** set limits on total or parts of government expenditures. They are relatively easy to operate and monitor, typically set in absolute terms or growth rates and refer to a specific time horizon. These rules are not linked directly to debt sustainability as they do not consider the revenue side. They can provide, however, an operational tool to trigger fiscal consolidation when accompanied by debt rules. Unless flanked with rules for cyclical adjustment, expenditure rules do not restrict the economic stabilisation function of fiscal policy in times of adverse shocks as they do not require adjustments to cyclical or discretionary reductions in tax revenues.
- **Revenue rules** set ceilings or floors on revenues and are aimed at boosting revenue collection and/or preventing an excessive tax burden. Most of these rules are not directly linked to public debt or spending. Furthermore, setting ceilings or floors on revenues is challenging as revenues are highly cyclical.

Source: Taken from Davoodi et al. (2022a), Annex I.

Figure 3: Number of rules per country

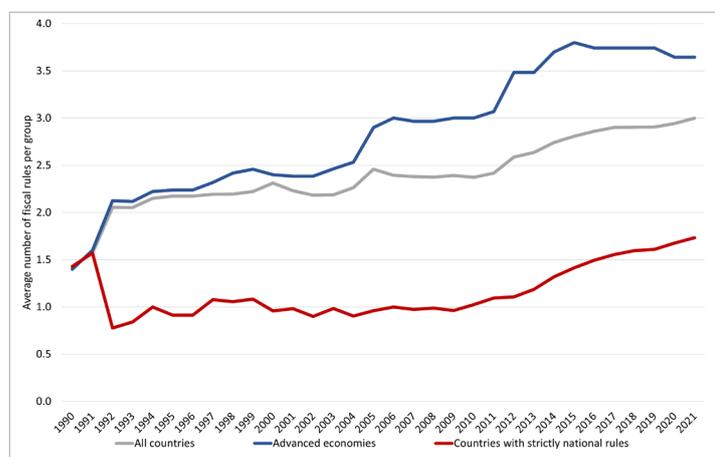
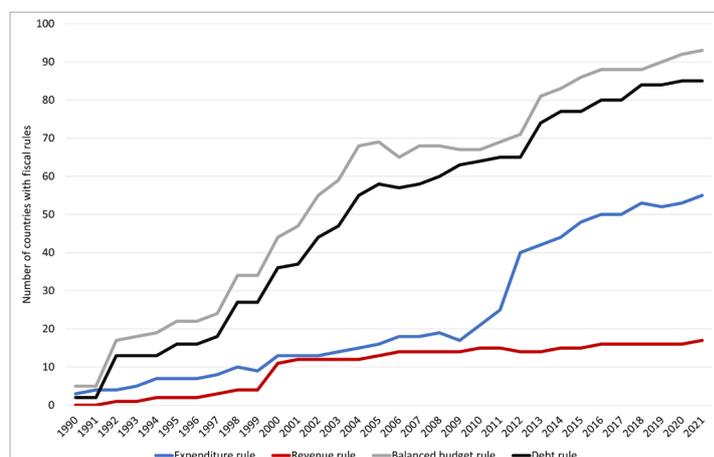


Figure 4: Types of fiscal rules



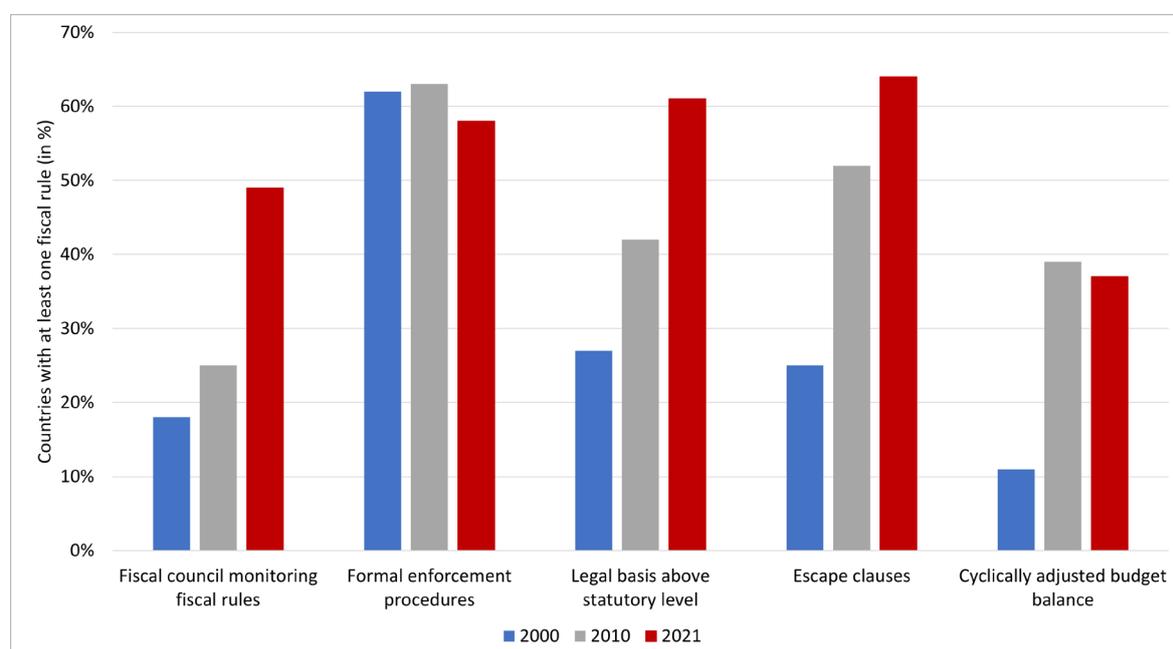
Sources: IMF Fiscal Rules Dataset: 1985–2021; Davoodi et al. (2022b).

Notes: According to the definition of the IMF, advanced economies include Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Macao, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Puerto Rico, San Marino, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States.

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Along with their expansion, the design of fiscal rules experienced a continuous refinement. In particular, the design has been progressively enriched to enhance flexibility (including escape clauses and cyclical adjustment components) and strengthen enforcement and monitoring of fiscal rules. The latter includes strengthening the legal basis and installing independent monitoring by IFIs (Figure 5). Eyraud et al. (2018) define such rules as “second-generation” fiscal rules. While multiple and refined rules may ensure greater fiscal discipline, they also increase complexity of the fiscal framework and thus complicate public communication and fiscal rules compliance.

Figure 5: Fiscal rules flexibility and enforcement characteristics, 2000–2021



Source: IMF Fiscal Rules Dataset: 1985–2021; Davoodi et al. (2022b).

Note: Percent of total number of economies with at least one fiscal rule.

3. Empirical evidence on fiscal rules

A rich empirical literature investigates the impact of fiscal rules. First, the focus is on surveying recent studies that investigate the relationship between fiscal rules and “traditional” fiscal performance measures, such as public debt and budget balances. Second, studies on related dimensions, including the impact of fiscal rules on budget forecasts and sovereign bond ratings are discussed. Third, we review the empirical literature that studies whether fiscal rules undermine public investment. Fourth, we survey empirical work that examines the relationship between fiscal rules and pro-cyclicality. Fifth, we provide an overview of the emerging literature on the interaction of fiscal rules and independent fiscal institutions. Sixth, this section presents emerging evidence on fiscal rules and broader political outcomes. The section concludes with a discussion of cross-sectional issues. Table A1 in the Appendix presents an overview of the empirical studies.

3.1 Do fiscal rules improve “traditional” fiscal performance measures?

A first comprehensive study is presented by Debrun et al. (2008). They exploit a sample of 25 EU countries for the period 1990–2005 using dynamic panel estimation methods. It is found that budget balance and debt rules contribute to limiting the budget deficit. The study acknowledges that fiscal outcomes and fiscal rules may be jointly determined by unobserved political factors. However, they argue that the evidence suggests that causality runs from fiscal rules to fiscal outcomes, and that rules that take into account the stabilisation function of fiscal policy are associated with less pro-cyclical policies.

For EU countries and the period 1990–2012, Nerlich and Reuter (2013) construct a new set of indicators for national fiscal institutions. These national fiscal institutions have been influenced by the EU fiscal framework. The authors use dummy variables instead of the composite indices often employed in the literature, which better allows to quantify the impact of changes in fiscal frameworks. Using a dynamic panel estimation approach, they find that the introduction of fiscal rules is related to lower public expenditures as well as to lower revenues. As the impact on revenues is smaller, the primary balance improves. This impact is stronger when fiscal rules are enacted in law or constitution and supported by independent fiscal institutions and effective medium-term expenditure frameworks. Fiscal rules have the strongest limiting impact on social spending, compensation of public employees, general public services and defence expenditures. While balanced budget rules affect most expenditure categories, the effect of debt rules is concentrated on specific categories. For expenditure rules, no statistically significant relationships are found.

Based on a panel of 30 OECD countries, Fall et al. (2015) find that fiscal rules are related to improved fiscal performance. In particular, a budget balance rule appears to have a positive and significant effect on the primary balance and a negative and significant effect on public spending. Expenditure rules are associated with lower expenditure volatility and higher public investment efficiency.

Focusing on expenditure rules, Cordes et al. (2015) present an analysis for 29 advanced and developing countries for the period 1985–2013. Using a dynamic panel estimation approach, the analysis shows that these rules are associated with better spending control, counter-cyclical fiscal

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policy and improved fiscal discipline. The authors also suggest that expenditure rules are associated with lower public expenditure volatility and higher public investment efficiency.¹

Based on data from 74 countries from the years between 1985 and 2012, Badinger and Reuter (2017) also find that countries with more rigorous fiscal rules show a better budgetary balance, lower interest rate spread for bonds and lower GDP volatility. They address issues related to the measurement of the stringency of fiscal rules and endogeneity in a novel way: Identification of their effects is achieved by exploiting institutional variables (checks and balances, government fragmentation, inflation targeting) as determinants of fiscal rules in an instrumental variable estimation approach.

Asatryan et al. (2018) study whether constitutional-level fiscal rules – expected to be more binding – impact fiscal outcomes. They exploit historical data for a large set of countries dating back to the nineteenth century. In a first step, a synthetic control analysis for nine case study countries is presented. For each of these countries, the authors estimate the counterfactual levels of fiscal policy variables after introducing or lifting a balanced budget rule; that is, the fiscal outcomes in a hypothetical country with or without a corresponding rule.² In the majority of case studies, the synthetic control approach provides evidence that balanced budget rules constrain government debt and expenditures, but also highlight country-specific circumstances. For the introduction of the debt brake in Switzerland in 2003, the synthetic control analysis suggests that it leads to a large reduction of the debt-to-GDP ratio by about 30 percentage points. However, the adoption of the debt brake followed a period of increasing government debt, raising the issue of selection bias. Applying a difference-in-differences estimation approach, they find that the introduction of a constitutional balance budget rule leads to a lower probability of sovereign debt crisis. For their most preferred sample of 132 countries between 1945 and 2015, they find that the debt-to-GDP ratio decreases by around 11 percentage points on average with constitutional balance budget rules. Most of these consolidations are explained by decreasing expenditures rather than increasing tax revenues. No evidence is found for similar effects in the case of balance-budget rules included in national legislation.

Pfeil and Feld (2018) evaluate the Swiss debt brake – being the blueprint for the German debt brake and also important when the reinforcement of the EU fiscal framework after the global financial crisis was designed. They apply a synthetic control method and study the period 1995–2007, referring to 23 OECD countries. The debt brake is found to improve the budget balance by about 3.6 percentage points of GDP on average on a post intervention period covering five years. Concerning the debt ratio, no clear results emerge due to data restrictions.

Salvi et al. (2020) extend the analysis by Pfeil and Feld (2016). Based on data for the period of 1980 to 2010 and also using a synthetic control group method, they find that the debt brake at the federal level decreased debt by 19.7 percentage points after seven years – an annual reduction of

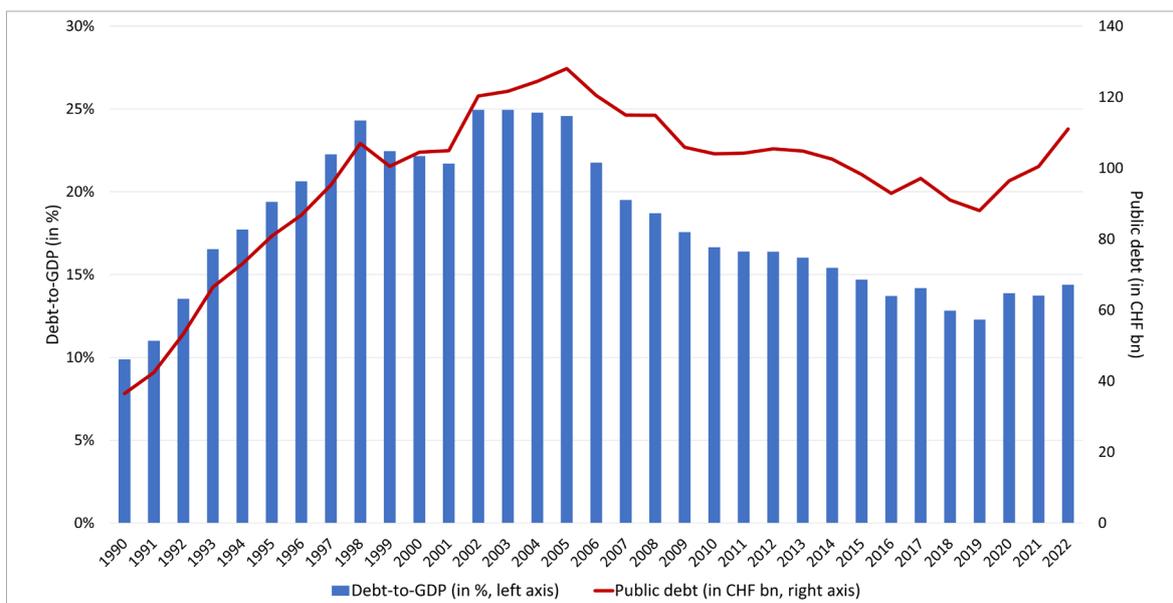
1 Albuquerque (2011) studies whether fiscal institutions impact public spending volatility. For 23 EU countries, he provides first evidence for a negative impact of the quality of fiscal institutions as approximated by a fiscal delegation and a fiscal rule index on discretionary public spending volatility.

2 The synthetic control method is based on the idea that a weighted average of countries in the control group can represent the properties of an affected country better than a single unaffected country alone. The counterfactual outcomes are compared to the actual fiscal variables.

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2.5 percentage points on average – compared to its synthetic counterpart. No evidence is found for the decline in the federal debt ratio being due to debt relocation to the subnational level or reduction in general investment spending on the federal level. Figure 6 illustrates the development of central government debt in Switzerland before and after the introduction of the debt brake in 2003.³

Figure 6: Central government debt in Switzerland, 1990–2022



Source: Federal Finance Administration.

Burret and Feld (2018a) investigate the effects of fiscal rules for the case of Swiss cantons, taking explicitly into account the fiscal rules' coverage.⁴ First, based on data for 1980–2011, they find that fiscal rules are related to lower public deficits. This relationship is stronger the better the analysed budget position matches the variable targeted by the rules. Second, fiscal rules exhibit some unintended effects, i.e., an evasion into unconstrained accounts, such as investment accounts. Third, cantonal fiscal rules dampen the fiscal deterioration during unexpected deficit shocks by more rapid fiscal adjustments. Fourth, political budget cycles depend on the institutional context, i.e., the timing of elections (early or late in the year) and tend to be mitigated by fiscal rules.⁵

³ Jarck et al. (2022) present a discussion on the Swiss debt brake, including experiences and current challenges.

⁴ Given that Switzerland has a long tradition in decentralised fiscal autonomy and fiscal institutions, there is empirical research from the subnational level, e.g., Schaltegger (2002), Feld and Kirchgässner (2008), Krogstrup and Wälti (2008) for early contributions. Kirchgässner (2013) offers a review on fiscal institutions at the cantonal level. There is further evidence on the subnational level, for instance, by Eliason and Lutz (2018) for the United States and Grembi et al. (2016) for Italy. Burret and Feld (2014) discuss the early evidence from the Swiss and US subnational levels.

⁵ There is some work that examines fiscal rules and electoral budget cycles. Ademmer and Dreher (2016) find for EU countries that fiscal institutions only help to limit the size of electoral budget cycles in weak media environments. Gootjes et al. (2021) exploit a panel of 77 countries and find that fiscal rules dampen electoral budget cycles.

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Caselli and Reynaud (2020) study the effect of fiscal rules on fiscal balances in a panel of 142 countries for 1985–2015. Their instrumental variable approach exploits the geographical diffusion of fiscal rules across countries. The intuition is that reforms in neighbouring countries affect the adoption of domestic reforms through peer pressure and imitational effects. Fiscal rules in neighbouring countries captures an exogenous source of variation in domestic rules that does not directly impact the fiscal balance. They find that fiscal rules are related to lower deficits. This relationship disappears when endogeneity is taken into account. However, when considering an index of fiscal rules' design, well-designed rules have a significant positive impact on fiscal balances. The IMF fiscal rule index covers several dimensions (see Box 2). Moving from a relatively weakly designed fiscal rule to a better designed fiscal rule can increase the fiscal balance by 0.6% of GDP.

Box 2: Measuring the strength of fiscal rules

The European Commission (EC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have both build an index to operationalise and compare the strength of fiscal rules across countries and over time. They are relatively similar in their construction, both including four institutional criteria: (i) statutory or legal basis of fiscal rules; (ii) nature of the entity in charge of the monitoring of fiscal rules; (iii) correction mechanisms; and (iv) resilience of fiscal rules against shocks. Additionally, the EC includes a measure for setting or revising the rules. The EC index applies to EU member states, while the IMF index covers a broader range of countries.

The methodology assigns a strength score for each type of fiscal rule – namely expenditure rule, budget balance rule, revenue rule and debt rule based on indicators that affect the criteria above. Each indicator is standardised between 0 and 1, with weights assigned on each rule. If a country has multiple rules, the total score is a weighted sum of each rule, with declining weights assigned to each additional rule. The IMF index does not explicitly weight national and supranational rules differently, but rather by the level of government that the rules apply. The central government is assigned the highest weight. Moreover, the legal basis of the rules, which reflects the degree of supranational bindingness, might also affect the rules' weights. The EC index gives more weight to supranational rules that are part of the EU fiscal framework (including balanced budget and debt rules), since they have a higher legal basis than national rules. Despite differences in the underlying indices, these two indices are strongly correlated.

While these indices provide a means to compare the strength of fiscal rules among countries and over time, there are also important limitations. In particular, they do not capture all design issues and implementation challenges. For instance, they do not distinguish the differences of a sound debt anchor and a hard ceiling in the debt rule, or whether escape clauses are well designed.

Source: Davoodi et al. (2022a), Annex III.

Bergman et al. (2016) innovatively contribute to the literature in adding the dimension of institutional quality. They assess whether national fiscal rules alone help to promote sustainable public finances or whether they must be supported by broader good governance. To this end, they use a dynamic panel estimation approach and focus on 27 EU countries for 1990–2012. They find that

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fiscal rules are effective in reducing structural primary deficits at all levels of government efficiency. Government efficiency is assessed using the World Bank “efficiency of government bureaucracy” index. However, the effect is smaller as government efficiency increases. This finding indicates that fiscal rules and broader government efficiency are – above a certain threshold – institutional substitutes in terms of promoting fiscal sustainability. The analysis also suggests that balanced budget rules are the most effective fiscal rules. Other institutional features that enhance the effectiveness of fiscal rules are transparency and commitment to implementation of fiscal programmes.⁶

Overall, there is evidence finding that fiscal rules improve fiscal performance and reduce public spending volatility. Empirical research suggests that balanced budget rules and expenditure rules are more effective compared to debt or revenue rules alone. Recent contributions emphasise that the effectiveness of fiscal rules depends on their design and the institutional context.

However, these results have to be interpreted with caution. From a methodological perspective, a positive relationship between fiscal rules and fiscal performance may not necessarily imply causality. It may simply reflect the fact that governments that are more concerned with sound fiscal policies and long-term fiscal sustainability are also likely to introduce and implement fiscal rules. Or, it may also reflect that governments are more likely to implement rules when they expect them to be achievable, such as when the economy and public finances are already expected to naturally recover following a crisis.

In this context, Heinemann et al. (2018) provide an important first meta-regression analysis on the relationship between fiscal rules and fiscal performance. Based on 30 studies published between 2004 and 2014, their evidence points to a constraining effect of fiscal rules on fiscal aggregates. With respect to the effect size, their meta-regression analysis points to a deficit reducing impact in the range of 1.2 to 1.5% of GDP if a fiscal rule is in place. However, this result is weakened as their study finds a bias if the potential endogeneity of fiscal rules is not explicitly taken into account. For instance, the use of instrumental variables or quasi-experimental designs leads to markedly lower levels of significance and a less constraining impact of fiscal rules. Furthermore, their analysis provides evidence for a publication bias, also reducing the precision of the constraining effects of fiscal rules. Therefore, one should interpret the empirical findings on the impacts of fiscal rules with caution. Box A1 in the Appendix briefly sheds light on the empirical methods to address the issue of endogeneity when analysing the impact of fiscal rules.

3.2 Do fiscal rules increase the accuracy of budget forecasts?

Rationale

Accurate public budgets are an important ingredient to increase the planning security of economic agents and to hold political decision makers and the public administration accountable. For example, overoptimistic, inaccurate revenue forecasts may distort fiscal policy making and result in the underprovision of public goods. Political economy considerations suggest that there are

⁶ Gootjes and de Haan (2022a) confirm the role of government efficiency and fiscal rules, but do not find evidence of complementarity.

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incentives for politicians to promise public expenditures that are higher than what will be delivered to please particular interest groups and, in parallel, to present overly optimistic public revenue forecasts to pretend to stick to fiscal discipline. In fact, empirical studies show that budget forecasts in many countries tend to be overly optimistic, often because estimates of economic growth are over-optimistic (Strauch et al., 2009; Beetsma et al., 2009; Frankel and Schreger, 2013).

Fiscal rules may create incentives for fiscal discipline. However, they may also create incentives to work around constraints by using “creative accounting” and “window-dressing”. von Hagen (2010) argues that fiscal rules could create incentives to be overly optimistic in budget projections in order to postpone politically sensitive decisions. However, without fiscal rules, finance ministers may strategically use over-pessimistic budget forecasts to rein in the spending ministers and the parliament. Fiscal rules lower these incentives (see also Luechinger and Schaltegger, 2013).

Empirical evidence

A particularly interesting study is presented by Luechinger and Schaltegger (2013). They study the differential effects of fiscal rules on projected and realised deficits. In their analysis of Swiss cantons over the period 1984–2005, they find that fiscal rules lower the probability of projected and realised deficits, with the former effect being twice as large. Since budget projections in Swiss cantons tend to be over-pessimistic on average, fiscal rules increase the probability of more accurate (less pessimistic) projections. Thus, fiscal rules seem to substitute for finance ministers’ over-pessimistic projections intended to reign in other ministers and parliaments with stronger incentives to increase public spending.

Chatagny (2015) explores the relationship between the ideology of the finance minister and tax revenue forecast errors, and assesses how fiscal rules impact this relationship. Exploiting Swiss cantons over the period 1980–2007, the study uses a panel estimation approach. A rather counter-intuitive positive relationship between the ideology and tax revenue forecast errors is found in the sense that a more left-wing finance minister produces relatively more conservative budget forecasts. Interestingly, the empirical analysis shows a negative effect of the interaction between the finance minister’s ideology and fiscal rules, highlighting that more stringent fiscal rules tend to reduce the positive effect of the ideology. These results suggest that left-wing finance ministers need to curb deficits relatively more in order to signal the same level of competence.

Picchio and Santolini (2020) study the impact of the domestic stability pact on the accuracy of budget forecasts at the local government level in Italy. They exploit a quasi-natural experiment set-up, i.e., the removal of the fiscal restraints on budget decisions for municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants in 2001 and stricter budgetary restrictions and severe penalties for non-compliers in 2002. Using a difference-in-discontinuities approach, the authors find that relaxing fiscal rules has a sizeable causal impact on budget forecast errors, especially in 2002. For instance, revenue (expenditure) forecast errors for municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants are 26% (22%) larger than those of municipalities just above the cut-off.

Mancini and Tommasino (2023) document that Italian public administrations systematically overestimate capital expenditures. Exploring unique data including budgetary figures (both planned and realised) for all Italian municipalities, the authors exploit a national reform introducing a spending

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limit on realised capital expenditures only for municipalities above a certain population threshold (5000 residents). Using a differences-in-discontinuities approach for the reform enacted in 2004, they show that municipalities subject to the capital-spending rule significantly reduced their over-optimism in expenditure projections: planned capital expenditures decrease more than actual ones. As explanation, the authors put forward that the capital-expenditure limit makes overly ambitious investment promises less credible and helps to bring spending plans in line with reality. Furthermore, they find that capital revenues are also overestimated, and that the forecast accuracy of these projected revenues improves due to the fiscal constraint. This is in line with political-economy considerations. In particular, as there is less room to boost public expenditures, there are also fewer incentives to engage in window-dressing on the public revenue side.

Taken together, the emerging evidence finds that fiscal rules contribute to more accurate budgetary forecasts and thereby increase the reliability and credibility of fiscal policies.

3.3 Do fiscal rules affect sovereign bond ratings?

Rationale

Higher public deficits and debt deteriorate sovereign bond ratings. For instance, a study by Schuknecht et al. (2009) find that central government risk premia respond positively to debt and deficits for central governments in Europe and subnational governments in Germany, Spain and Canada. If fiscal rules are effective instruments for fiscal discipline and debt sustainability, rational investors should assess the sustainability and thus the credibility of a country's fiscal policy more positive if it has a fiscal rule and demand a lower compensation for the default risk of the sovereign bond than for a comparable country without any fiscal rules. Investors are also likely to perceive the adoption of fiscal rules as a signal of commitment to sounder macroeconomic policies and reforms more broadly. This should positively impact sovereign debt rating assessments and reduce bond spreads as an indicator of markets and liquidity risk.

Empirical evidence

Early evidence is mainly based on survey data from US states. It supports the view that tighter fiscal rules lower state bond interest rates (Poterba and Rueben, 1999; Poterba and Rueben, 2001; and Lowry and Alt, 2001).

An interesting contribution by Iara and Wolff (2014) studies the relationship between fiscal rules and risk premia for the initial eleven euro-area countries for 1999–2009. The authors use the European Commission's fiscal rule index (see Box 2). Applying a panel estimation approach, they do not find a significant effect of fiscal rules on risk spreads, but they do find a statistically significant impact if they interact the fiscal rule index with the general risk aversion of the market. Thus, fiscal rules appear to have a negative effect on bond spreads in a market environment where risk sensitivity is high.

Afonso and Guimarães (2015) assess whether numerical fiscal rules impact budget balances and sovereign yields. For a panel of 27 EU countries between 1990 and 2011, it is found that fiscal

3. Empirical evidence on fiscal rules

rules, approximated with the European Commission's and the IMF's fiscal rule index, reduce budget deficits, while countries with stricter fiscal rules experience lower sovereign bond yields.

In a follow-up paper, Afonso and Jalles (2019) assess the relationship between fiscal rules on sovereign bond spreads in more detail and for 34 advanced countries and 19 emerging market economies over the period 1980–2016. Their results show that the impact of fiscal rules on sovereign yield spreads is negative and statistically significant, at around 1.2–1.8 percentage points, implying lower government borrowing costs. This result stems essentially from the advanced economies subsample. Moreover, in times of recession, a fiscal rule is related to reduced government bond risk premia. Independent monitoring of compliance with fiscal rules also reduces sovereign spreads.

Thornton and Vasilakis (2017) present broader international evidence for fiscal rules and sovereign risk premia. They study a sample of 67 advanced and developing countries for the period 1985–2012 and rely on the IMF fiscal institutions dataset. Their results suggest that the adoption of fiscal rules reduces sovereign risk premia by 1.1–1.2% for debt rules and by 1.5–1.8% for budget balance rules of the international borrowing spread. They address self-selection of policy adoption by applying propensity score matching methods.

Feld et al. (2017) also relate fiscal frameworks to financial market ratings. They analyse the effects of a credible no-bailout policy and sub-national fiscal rules on the risk premia of Swiss subnational government bonds in the period 1981–2007. The results suggest that a not fully credible no-bailout commitment can entail high costs for the potential guarantor. Strong balanced budget rules are related to reduced sovereign risk premia.

Sawadogo (2020) focuses on the role of fiscal rules in terms of improving financial markets access for developing countries. Fiscal rules are argued to increase the government's credibility in conducting sound fiscal policies. They apply an entropy balancing method to construct a weighted synthetic group of countries to address the self-selection bias into a rules-based fiscal policy.⁷ The adoption of fiscal rules is found to reduce sovereign bond spreads and to increase sovereign debt ratings in a sample of 36 countries covering the period 1993–2014. More specifically, fiscal rule adoption lowers bond spreads by up to 1.5% while it increases sovereign debt ranking by up to one grade. Regarding the types of fiscal rules, balanced budget rules and debt rules significantly improve access to financial markets, while expenditures rules appear to improve financial market access only in combination with multi-year expenditure ceilings.

A novel contribution that further differentiates the transmission channels of the impact of fiscal rules is presented by Hansen (2020). He argues that while fiscal frameworks are effective at improving governments' fiscal balances, the financial markets discipline hypothesis is likely not the causal mechanism which disciplines governments' fiscal policies. Instead, he proposes that fiscal

7 Entropy balancing has advantages as it combines matching and regression analysis. Entropy balancing consists of two steps. The first step requires computation of weights which are assigned to the control units (e.g., non-fiscal rule countries). In the second step, these weights are used in a regression analysis with the treatment variable (e.g., fiscal rule countries) as explanatory variable. Afterwards, fiscal rule countries and non-fiscal rule countries are balanced based on observable characteristics. Thus, the average difference in outcomes between fiscal rule countries and the "closest" non-fiscal rule countries should be explained by the adoption of rules (see Hainmueller, 2012).

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rules and fiscal transparency promote better budget balances because opponent political actors use fiscal frameworks as an instrument to constrain executive policy making. For a sample of 69 countries for the period 1990–2008, he tests these competing hypotheses of why fiscal frameworks are effective – financial market discipline versus political competition. He finds that budget balances are increased not as a consequence of financial markets’ ratings, but when the level of political competition and civil society engagement is sufficiently high. These results are robust to accounting for the possible selection bias of who adopts fiscal frameworks in the first place.⁸

Overall, fiscal rules improve sovereign bond ratings. In particular, the emerging evidence suggests that stricter rules are more effective and that the impact of fiscal rules is particularly relevant under uncertain market conditions.

3.4 Do fiscal rules undermine public investment?

Rationale

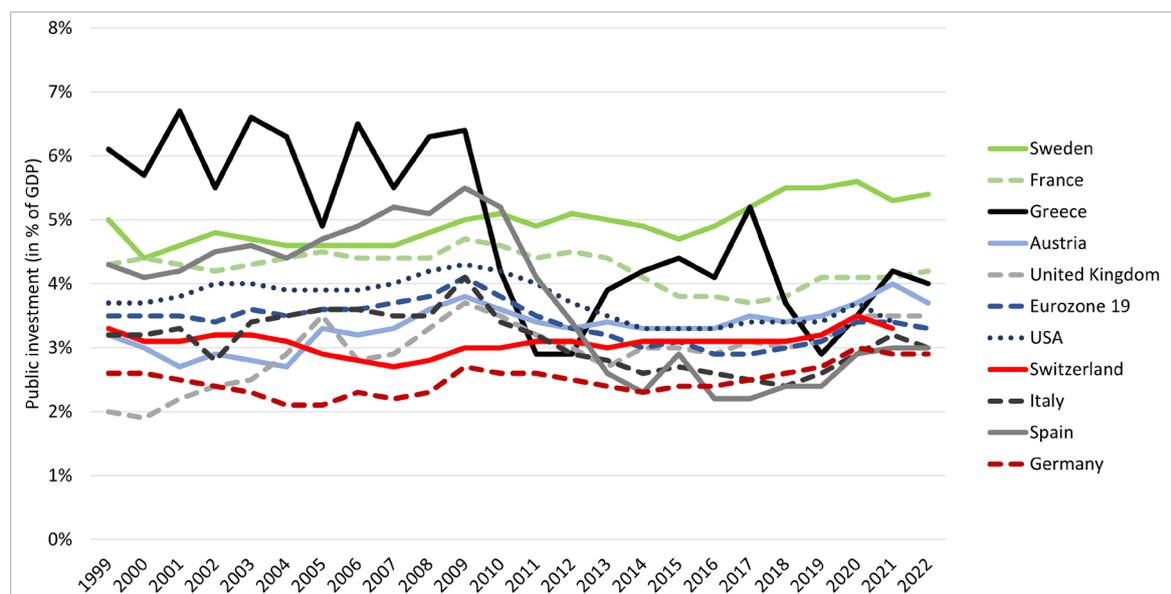
Investment is a key factor to economic growth; this also includes public investment, as it contributes to the expansion of the capital stock as a whole. Although there may be inherent risks of crowding-out effects or difficulties in meeting expectations on public investment efficiency, public capital, e.g., infrastructure, utilities, R&D or security, not only provides supply where markets are likely to fail, but it may also complement private sector investments leading to spillovers and inducing multiplier effects. Against this background, the decline of public investment as a share of GDP in most of the OECD countries over the last five decades (e.g., Bom and Ligthart, 2014; Ardanaz et al., 2021) raises concerns. Figure 7 depicts the heterogeneous development of public investment as a share of GDP over more than 20 years in selected OECD countries.

There is a debate on whether the adoption of fiscal rules is one of the possible drivers of this downtrend. Early studies indicate that inadequately designed fiscal rules may tempt strategic behaviour of governments (Dur et al., 1999), in particular, to favour short-term consumption over capital expenditure whose benefits materialise only much later (Blanchard and Giavazzi, 2004). Current generations may find little incentives to take on the entire tax burden for investments that benefit mostly future generations (Bom, 2019). As a result, current public investment is prone to fall below optimal levels. Turrini (2004) adds to the discussion arguing that the relationship between fiscal rules and public investment is more complex: As fiscal rules may prevent the accumulation of debt today, future governments are likely to have more fiscal space for public investment. The debate on whether public investment is unduly constrained by fiscal rules and should be protected was further spurred, when in the 2010s capital costs sunk to a long-time low and, at the same time, the need to address challenges like climate change, population ageing or public infrastructure became more salient. A prominent case in point is the recent debate on the debt brake and public investment in Germany (e.g., Fuest et al., 2019; Feld et al., 2019; Hüther and Südekum, 2020). Ultimately, it is an empirical question whether fiscal rules undermine public investment.

⁸ In a related paper, Heinemann et al. (2014) find that the impact of fiscal rules on sovereign bonds in euro-area countries is less important once historical fiscal preferences for stability are taken into account.

3. Empirical evidence on fiscal rules

Figure 7: Public investment in selected OECD countries, 1999–2022



Source: OECD.

Empirical evidence

The presented analyses below follow different empirical approaches and, depending on design and institutional context, may refer to different definitions of ‘public investment’. However, most commonly ‘public investment’ corresponds to ‘gross fixed capital formation’ or ‘gross capital formation’ as defined by the OECD.

An early study on the relationship between fiscal rules and public investment is presented by Perée and Väililä (2005). Based on a discussion on the arguments for and against exempting public capital expenditure from fiscal rules, the analysis assesses the determinants of public investment, with a focus on the fiscal rules embodied in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). The authors estimate panel data and country-specific models for 14 EU countries for the period from 1970 to 2003. The evidence suggests that statistically significant determinants of public investment include aspects like national income and the budgetary situation. The empirical estimates do not suggest that there is a significant relationship between the deficit rule applied in the EMU and the decline in public investment. Rather, it seems that the downtrend in public investment was related to longer-term fiscal consolidation efforts in most countries well before the Maastricht Treaty was implemented.

Based on a panel of 22 OECD countries for 1960 to 2010, Dahan and Strawczynsky (2013) examine the influence of fiscal rules on the composition of government expenditure. They focus on the potential effects of fiscal rules in undermining social transfer spending. Regarding public investment, the authors find that the ratio between public investment spending and government consumption does not change in a significant way. The authors conclude that concerns regarding fiscal rules hampering public investment cannot be confirmed.

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Afonso and Jalles (2015) investigate which macroeconomic and budgetary components drive both private and public investment, employing a panel data analysis based on data for 95 advanced and developing countries for the period 1970 to 2008. Among the various estimated correlations in search of determinants of capital expenditure, the authors find negative partial correlations for the overall EU fiscal rule index and the budget balance rule index for a panel on EU countries between 1990 and 2008. This result indicates that strong fiscal rules constrain government spending, but they also decrease public investment in EU countries.

Delgado-Téllez et al. (2021) explore two prominent explanations for the historically low public investment in developed countries, i.e., (i) the “social dominance hypothesis”, according to which increased social spending is crowding-out public investment, and (ii) fiscal rules force governments to reduce public investment. The analysis tests the validity of both explanations using two empirical approaches (panel data fixed-effect models; local projections as a more flexible alternative to VAR specifications) for a sample of 22 OECD countries comprising data from 1960 to 2015. The authors find both factors to be statistically significantly associated with the decrease in investment. First, social spending contributes to crowding-out of public investments and is interpreted as a structural driver. Second, fiscal rules are negatively related to public investment, specifically in periods of fiscal consolidation; flexibility clauses of fiscal rules tend to weaken this relationship, however. It is worth noting that the analysis speaks also for an additional disciplining influence by fiscal rules on the dynamics of social spending, which in return can reduce the crowding-out effects on investment.

Ardanaz et al. (2021) also explain the shrinking public investment with both the policy-makers’ preference to cut public investments rather than current expenditure in order to comply with fiscal rules and the structural crowding-out due to growing welfare spending. They focus on the design of fiscal rules regarding flexibility as a determinant of public investment during fiscal consolidation. Based on a data set of 75 advanced and emerging economies for the period 1990–2018, the authors compare public investment under ‘rigid’ fiscal rules with ‘flexible’ ones (e.g., endowed with escape clauses to accommodate exogenous shocks, cyclically adjusted fiscal targets, different treatment for current spending vs. investment). Applying a panel fixed effects model, they find that in countries with either no or with a rigid fiscal rule, public investment is significantly reduced in episodes of fiscal adjustment. More precisely, a fiscal consolidation of at least 2 percent of GDP is associated with an average 10 percent reduction in public investment. This result also points to the pro-cyclical bias of rigid fiscal rules. However, this negative effect on public investment vanishes in countries with flexible rules, protecting public investment. The authors conclude that well-designed fiscal rules, including provisions for flexibility, are essential for growth-friendly fiscal policies.

Wijsman and Crombez (2021) also study the relationship between fiscal rules and public investment. For 28 EU countries between 1997 and 2016, they focus on the impact of national fiscal rules, as approximated by the European Commission’s fiscal rules strength index (see Box 2). Using dynamic panel regressions and controlling for a rich set of economic and political determinants, they find evidence that fiscal rules decrease public investment. More specifically, a rise in the FRSI from the 25th to the 75th percentile entails a decrease of public investment by 0.16 per cent of GDP. In conclusion, the authors point to the discussion of a ‘golden rule’ as a possible measure to protect public investment.

3. Empirical evidence on fiscal rules

In her comprehensive study, Vinturis (2022) investigates how the adoption of fiscal rules shapes governments' spending, including both public consumption and public investment. Based on a large panel of 185 countries over the period of 1985–2015 and applying entropy balancing to particularly address endogeneity and reverse causality, the adoption of fiscal rules is found to significantly reduce total public spending relative to comparable countries (being the control group) that did not adopt fiscal rules. However, while public consumption decreases under fiscal rules, public investment is not significantly affected. More specifically, with regard to the type of fiscal rule, debt rules and balanced budget rules, contrary to expenditure rules, significantly increase the ratio between public investment and public consumption. Summarising the multifaceted results, the author concludes that the adjustment of total public spending following the adoption of fiscal rules is not found to be echoed by a significant change in public investment.

A broadly similar picture is presented by Feld et al. (2021) for subnational jurisdictions in Switzerland between 2009 and 2018. Based on two panel datasets (cantons and larger municipalities) the study explores two issues: (i) the relationship between a cut in the key interest rate and the development of capital expenditure (using linear regression), and (ii) the influence of fiscal rules on public investment spending in a phase of low interest rates. Using a difference-in-differences design, a significantly negative correlation between capital cost and investment, specifically for public education and construction spending is found. However, there is no indication that fiscal rules would constrain cantonal investments in response to the cut in interest rates. Indeed, the evidence suggests that cantons with stricter fiscal rules even tend to expand their investment more than others. While no explicit explanation is given for this finding, it might be argued that strict fiscal rules provide more discipline in current consumption allowing more leeway for investments and overall capital costs are more favorable for jurisdictions with a stricter fiscal framework.

The recent study by Jürgens (2022) focuses on the impacts that fiscal rules have on the cyclicity of fiscal policies and on the influence that fiscal rules' flexibility features have on public investment. Analysing panel data for 23 EU countries over the period from 1985 to 2019, she finds that (i) public investment in the EU is pro-cyclical, especially in the downturn phase of a business cycle, and that (ii) 'rigid' fiscal rules without flexibility features seem to constrain public investment, specifically in economic downturns. Hence, her key policy conclusion is that fiscal rules should be endowed with adequate flexibility to reduce pro-cyclical effects and to safeguard growth-enhancing public investment.

Taken together, the empirical studies indicate that public investment is likely to be constrained in episodes of fiscal adjustment. As to the impact of fiscal rules, a mixed picture emerges. A majority of the reviewed studies suggests that rigid fiscal rules tend to undermine public investment, while well-designed fiscal rules with in-built flexibility do not undermine public investment. However, the flexibility provisions of fiscal rules should be carefully chosen in order to avoid diluting the fiscal rule with excessive discretion. The emerging picture is broadly in line with a recent review by Blesse et al. (2023) on the emerging empirical evidence regarding fiscal rules and public investment. The review by Blesse et al. (2023) covers studies on the national and subnational level, the latter evidence stemming primarily from Italy.

3.5 Do fiscal rules reduce pro-cyclicality?

Rationale

A primary objective of economic policy is to smooth out business cycle volatility, as larger variability in GDP growth comes at a high economic and social cost and ultimately weakens long-term economic growth. In the last decades of the 20th century, a majority of economists were convinced that primarily monetary policy, supported by automatic stabilisers (e.g., unemployment benefits), is sufficient to stabilise the economy in downturns. However, the experience of the great recession and the pandemic showed that there is a role for discretionary fiscal policy, especially with interest rates close to zero.

In practice, however, the debate on the impact of fiscal policy on economic cycles is ambiguous. Pro-cyclical effects, i.e., expansionary policies in good times and restrictive policies in bad times, are likely as governments' action is subject to substantial uncertainty and governments may suffer from the deficit bias. Looking at the literature, some empirical evidence tends to confirm pro-cyclicality (for a brief discussion, see e.g., de Haan et al., 2023), while other empirical studies present evidence for the counter-cyclicality of fiscal policy (for a brief discussion see, e.g., Combes et al., 2017).

Fiscal rules have been often blamed to force governments into pro-cyclical consolidation policies during downturns. Taking a closer look, however, fiscal rules are, on the one hand, expected to limit discretionary fiscal policy and thus reduce macroeconomic volatility and pro-cyclicality. On the other hand, fiscal rules may also limit the scope to carry out counter-cyclical fiscal policy and, consequently, aggravate output volatility and pro-cyclicality.

Assessing cyclicity and identifying the impact of fiscal rules is challenging, e.g., choosing the dependent and independent variables (say, the primary balance and the output gap), the use of real-time versus ex-post data, or the question of how to properly take into account explanatory factors, including fiscal rules (Golinelli and Momigliano, 2009). Apart from these technical issues, the level of institutional quality is likely to play a key role in a country's capacity to implement sound fiscal policies in the first place (Calderón et al., 2016).

Empirical evidence

Early studies on EU fiscal rules did not find evidence for a pro-cyclical impact of fiscal rules during downturns, acknowledging though that there had not been many recessions during the sample period. Galí and Perotti (2003) find that after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 fiscal policy in EU countries stopped being pro-cyclical. Manasse (2006) finds that fiscal rules reduce the degree of pro-cyclicality of fiscal policy. Debrun et al. (2008) associate budget balance rules and debt rules with higher pro-cyclicality, unless their design allows for correction for the economic cycle, while expenditure and revenue rules are rather found to go in the opposite direction.

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Most recent studies on advanced economies suggest that well-designed fiscal rules can reduce pro-cyclicality of fiscal policies. Holm-Hadulla et al. (2012) present evidence that expenditure rules reduce the pro-cyclical reaction of public spending to unexpected changes in the output gap. Bénétrix and Lane (2013) find support for the Maastricht Treaty being associated with more counter-cyclical policies.

Sacchi and Salotti (2015) aim at understanding whether fiscal rules impact governments' ability to stabilise the economy via discretionary fiscal policy making. For 21 OECD countries between 1985–2012, they use fixed effects and System-GMM estimators and find that the use of discretionary fiscal policy, particularly of government consumption, is related to higher output volatility. The authors find that once national fiscal rules are introduced, discretionary policy tends to become more output-stabilising. More precisely, output stability tends to increase with (stringent) fiscal rules. This result is found to be more relevant for balanced budgets rules rather than for revenue, expenditure or debt rules.

Nerlich and Reuter (2015) analyse the impact of fiscal rules on the so-called fiscal space, i.e. the room to manoeuvre for discretionary fiscal policy⁹, and how the interaction of fiscal rules and fiscal space determines the cyclicality of fiscal policy. Based on data for EU-27 between 1990 and 2014, they find that fiscal rules are strongly correlated with larger fiscal space, i.e., fiscal rules help to increase the room to manoeuvre for fiscal policy. In turn, the very same fiscal rules constrain excessive discretionary spending. Furthermore, they confirm that fiscal rules thus tend to curb pro-cyclicality from discretionary fiscal policy in an environment with fiscal space. The effect seems to be particularly strong for expenditure rules, less so for balanced budget rules and null for debt rules.

Combes et al. (2017) study how fiscal policy reacts to the business cycle, exploring a panel of 56 advanced, emerging and developing countries over the period 1990–2011. Overall, their results support the view that fiscal policy can be counter-cyclical, conditional however on the level of debt: The findings suggest that fiscal policy turns from counter-cyclical to pro-cyclical for higher public debt-to-GDP ratios (and vice versa), largely corresponding to the argument of 'fiscal space' by Nerlich and Reuter. Combes et al. (2017) show that the use of fiscal rules, although complex in a high debt environment, can support stabilisation in recessions and even help to restore counter-cyclical fiscal policy if appropriately designed. While expenditure or debt rules have no significant effect and escape clauses may even be harmful to stabilisation in a high debt context, deficit rules or a 'golden rule' for public investment seem to be more effective.

In the same vein, Guerguil et al. (2017) find that the design of fiscal rules is essential for their impact on pro-cyclicality. Based on a broad panel of 167 advanced and developing economies for the period 1990–2012, the study uses propensity scores-matching techniques to address endogeneity issues. The authors find that investment-friendly rules reduce the pro-cyclicality of overall government spending and investment spending. The effect appears stronger in bad times and when the rule is enacted at the national level. Escape clauses are found not to affect the cyclical

9 Fiscal space is defined as the difference between the current debt level and the 'debt limit', the point beyond which debt becomes unsustainable and extraordinary efforts must be taken to prevent a country's default (Ghosh et al., 2013).

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stance of public spending. The results are mixed for expenditure rules and cyclically-adjusted budget balance rules which are associated with counter-cyclical movements in overall public spending, but with pro-cyclical changes in investment spending. It is highlighted that structural factors like the country's development, past debt, government stability and legal enforcement or monitoring arrangements of fiscal rules influence the impact of fiscal rules on cyclicity.

Manescu and Bova (2020) examine the design, the effectiveness and the extent to which expenditure rules have been complied with in EU countries. Based on the European Commission's fiscal governance database, their estimates over the 1999–2016 period confirm that the magnitude of the pro-cyclical bias in fiscal policy is lower with expenditure rules. Moreover, the better the expenditure rule design in terms of legal base, independent monitoring, and consequences for non-compliance or coverage, the stronger the mitigating effect.

Larch et al. (2021) exploit a sample close to 40 EU and non-EU countries, using data up to 2017, with observations starting in the 1960s. They provide evidence that the volatility of output gap estimates is not a strong explanation for pro-cyclical fiscal policies. With the exception of large shocks, discretionary fiscal policies remain ill-timed from a macroeconomic stabilisation perspective. They also show that non-compliance with fiscal rules and the accumulation of government debt exacerbate pro-cyclical fiscal policy. In other words, increasing compliance with fiscal rules that involves limiting the increase in government debt or keeping a steady course of fiscal policy fosters counter-cyclical fiscal policies.

Still in this line of reasoning, yet with a slightly different focus, is the study by Reuter et al. (2022). They examine the effect of different types of fiscal rules on discretionary fiscal policy and thus on macroeconomic stability, employing a two-stage least square procedure. The empirical analysis for the EU-28 countries over the period of 1996–2015 shows that strong fiscal rules limit fiscal volatility, which, in turn, contributes to reduce output volatility. The effect can be observed for budget balance rules that set limits in cyclically adjusted terms and expenditure rules that restrict expenditure growth relative to potential GDP. These findings even hold in cases where fiscal rules are not always complied with, suggesting that rules may act as a benchmark. Eventually, the authors confirm the findings of the earlier studies by Fatás and Mihov (2006) who show that fiscal rules in US states, by constraining fiscal policy, reduce policy volatility and thus the fiscal source of business cycle volatility. Likewise, they sustain the results by Badinger and Reuter (2017) who highlight that strong legislative support or stringent enforcement procedures of fiscal rules matter.

Bergman and Hutchison (2015) extend previous work on fiscal rules and pro-cyclicity. They relate fiscal rules to the broader concept of government effectiveness and the idea that fiscal rules are more likely to work if applied within an effective institutional framework. More specifically, they look at fiscal rules with the prior that their effectiveness in mitigating pro-cyclical fiscal policy depends on the overall efficiency of government. They build an index to measure the strength of fiscal rules and interact it with the World Bank's efficiency of government bureaucracy index for a sample of 81 advanced, emerging and developing countries over the period between 1985 and 2012. Their empirical results suggest that, while government efficiency alone is not sufficient to reduce pro-cyclicity, the combination of fiscal rules and sufficiently high government efficiency

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provides an environment that fosters counter-cyclical policies. At the same time, they provide evidence indicating that fiscal rules are not effective when overall government efficiency is low.

Some of the recent studies conclude, however, that fiscal rules do not reduce pro-cyclicality or are not important for cyclicality. These studies mostly focus on emerging and developing economies and do not necessarily have fiscal rules as their primary topic. For instance, Furceri and Jalles (2018) find, based on a panel of 61 advanced and emerging economies over 1980–2014, that counter-cyclical fiscal policy is positively associated with the level of economic development, trade openness and government size, while fiscal rules play no significant role. Bova et al. (2018) focus on natural-resource-rich countries whose economies are specifically exposed to commodity price volatility (dataset of 48 non-renewable commodities exporting countries for 1970–2014). They find that fiscal policy tends to have a persistent pro-cyclical bias, while the adoption of fiscal rules does not reduce this bias. Instead, the quality of political institutions matters. In a study, based on a sample of 60 countries for 1980–2014, Jalles (2018) finds that counter-cyclical fiscal policy is larger in advanced economies and increasing over time, while fiscal rules, in particular debt rules, tend to reduce the degree of counter-cyclicality in fiscal policy.

Closely related to the macroeconomic effects of fiscal rules is the question of how they affect fiscal adjustments. There is a large literature on the determinants of fiscal adjustments and their success, including economic conditions as well as political influences. As to the role of fiscal rules, empirical analyses emerge.

Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis (2023) study the impact that the design of fiscal institutions has on fiscal adjustments. They exploit a panel of 40 advanced economies over the period 1990–2020 and investigate the effect of various characteristics of fiscal institutions on i) the probability of starting a fiscal adjustment and ii) on the probability that the fiscal adjustment will be successful. Well-designed fiscal rules which incorporate both strict and flexible features increase both the probability to initiate and to successfully conclude a fiscal adjustment. In more detail, a cyclically-adjusted budget balance target, a well specified escape clause, strict enforcement, a strong legal base and multi-annual spending limits are key design element as they are positively related to the successful conclusion of an adjustment programme. Design elements indicating stricter fiscal rules lead to a more pronounced increase in the probability of success vis-à-vis fiscal rule design elements that provide flexibility, e.g., by taking into account cyclical economic conditions and by excluding public investment or other priority items.

Gootjes and de Haan (2022b) extend the literature by investigating whether fiscal rules in combination with fiscal transparency (i) reduce the cyclically adjusted primary budget balance, (ii) make a fiscal adjustment more likely, and (iii) increase the probability of a successful fiscal adjustment, i.e., lead to a reduction of public debt. They analyse a panel of 73 countries over the 2003–2013 period. Based on a dynamic panel estimation, it is found that fiscal rules improve the budget balance only when the level of fiscal transparency is above a minimum threshold. As to fiscal adjustments, they follow the method by Wiese et al. (2018) to identify fiscal adjustments and their success, taking the volatility of fiscal policy into account, in contrast to one-size-fits-all measures. Their results suggest that fiscal rules make the occurrence and success of fiscal adjustments more likely but, again, only when the level of fiscal transparency is sufficiently high.

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The multifaceted empirical evidence suggests that fiscal rules can play a role in strengthening counter-cyclical fiscal policy and thus can foster macroeconomic stability. However, design features as well as economic and institutional context, including government efficiency or fiscal transparency, appear to be crucial for the effectiveness of fiscal rules. In particular, design elements like the type of rule, its legal base, independent monitoring and investment-friendliness matter for supporting counter-cyclical policies. A similar picture emerges when focusing on the impact of fiscal rules on fiscal adjustments.

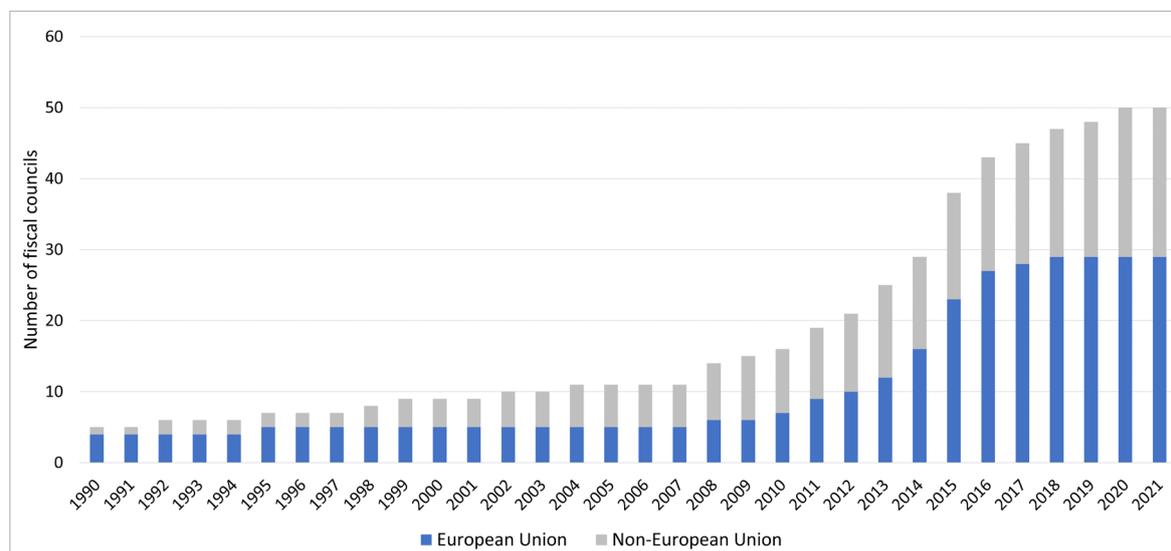
3.6 Independent fiscal institutions: Do they complement fiscal rules?

Rationale

Independent fiscal institutions (IFIs) form another element of fiscal frameworks and are set up to improve the transparency and oversight of fiscal policy. IFIs or their predecessor institutions with certain IFI mandates have existed for a long time in some countries (e.g., Denmark, Netherlands, United States). Recently, the establishment of IFIs has multiplied – often as part of the reinforcement of the EU Fiscal Framework (Figure 8). The remit of these institutions varies across countries and often includes the assessments of budgetary plans, long-term sustainability and the evaluation or provision of macroeconomic and budgetary forecasts (Debrun et al., 2009; Hagemann, 2011; Kopits, 2011; von Trapp et al., 2016). IFIs also have played a role in evaluating public support packages during COVID-19 (OECD, 2020).

IFIs can influence fiscal policy outcomes via two channels. The first is directly through their contributions to the budget process and the implementation of fiscal policy, whereas the second is an indirect consequence of their ability to inform the public about fiscal policy in a non-partisan manner (Debrun et al., 2013). This ability of IFIs to reduce informational asymmetries between voters and decision-makers has been studied theoretically (Calmfors and Wren-Lewis, 2011; Kopits, 2011; Calmfors, 2015; Beetsma and Debrun, 2016). These authors support the view that IFIs can reduce informational asymmetries by providing better information, more accurate forecasts, or simply by encouraging fiscal discipline of politicians via raising reputational costs of undesirable fiscal policies. For example, Kopits (2011) emphasises four design pillars to ensure the impact of IFIs: (i) political ownership of the mandate and modus operandi; (ii) guarantees of operational independence; (iii) adequate staffing; and (iv) a remit focused on a non-partisan assessment of fiscal policy, the analysis of fiscal sustainability and the promotion of fiscal transparency.

Figure 8: Fiscal councils, 1990–2021



Source: IMF Fiscal Council dataset; Davoodi et al. (2022c).

Closely related to the preceding sections, the relationship between IFIs and fiscal rules is a key question. Should IFIs be seen as substitutes for fiscal rules, allowing policy to be more discretionary, or should they complement fiscal rules by monitoring them and by assessing conditions to activate escape clauses? This complementarity between fiscal rules and IFIs is even more important to help in the implementation of complex rules, for instance, in the case of the EU fiscal framework (Beetsma and Debrun, 2018). The emerging evidence points to the complementary view, i.e., IFIs complement the discipline-reinforcing role of fiscal rules.¹⁰

Empirical evidence

The paper by Debrun and Kumar (2008) is one of the first empirical analyses on the topic. Using data compiled by the European Commission on IFIs at the national level, the authors construct indexes to characterise the legal setup, mandate, independence, and potential influence of IFIs on fiscal discipline, and explored the relationship between IFIs and fiscal rules. The results obtained from an EU sample over the 1990–2004 period lead the authors to conclude that fiscal rules are associated with better fiscal performance and that IFIs can influence fiscal outcomes by reinforcing compliance with fiscal rules. In particular, their results indicate that IFIs, particularly those with guarantees of independence, are associated with improved budget balances. While the empirical analysis is rigorous, the authors discuss the limitations of their approach such as reverse causality and the omitted variable bias. In particular, there is a possibility that omitted variables may exert a joint influence on fiscal outcomes and fiscal institutions.

¹⁰ The delegation of fiscal instruments to IFIs is an issue prominently addressed in the literature. Several authors (Wren-Lewis, 1996; Gruen, 2001; Calmfors, 2003; Wyplosz, 2005; Larch and Brändle, 2018) have suggested the delegation of selected macro dimensions of fiscal policy to an independent fiscal institution similar to the delegation of monetary policy decisions to independent central banks. However, there is a consensus that IFIs should have a purely advisory function as fiscal policy-making involves democratic decision-making with important (re-)distributional consequences.

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Nerlich and Reuter (2013) build a novel dataset of fiscal frameworks (numerical fiscal rules, IFIs, and medium-term budgetary frameworks), covering 27 EU countries from 1990 to 2012. Based on a dynamic panel estimation, the results highlight the role of fiscal rules in improving the primary balance. They find that the positive effect on the primary balance can be further strengthened when fiscal rules are enacted in law or constitution and supported by independent fiscal councils and an effective medium-term budgeting framework.

Fall et al. (2015) study the design of debt targets. To this end, they also study the complementary role of fiscal rules and IFIs regarding fiscal performance. Based on a dataset of 30 OECD countries and a period of 20 years, their estimations find a disciplining effect of fiscal rules. Their estimations show that it is difficult to capture the effectiveness of IFIs. The impact of IFIs on the primary balance is not statistically significant in most of the specifications. However, IFIs limit spending when interacted with a budget balance rule.

The empirical analysis by Debrun and Kinda (2017) comprises data covering 58 advanced and emerging countries over the 1990–2011 period. In line with previous studies, they confirm that countries with strong fiscal rules tend to exhibit a better fiscal performance. Based on detailed information on the mandate, tasks, and institutional features of around 30 IFIs, the results suggest that the mere existence of IFIs does not grant better fiscal performance, but a positive association exists when certain characteristics of IFIs are present (namely independence, fiscal rule monitoring, forecasts production/assessment and media impact). They conclude that IFIs can enhance the effectiveness of fiscal rules. They also acknowledge the possibility of reversed causality in the sense that countries which are more concerned about fiscal discipline may have better fiscal rules and a fiscal council.

Beetsma et al. (2019) extend the work by Debrun and Kinda (2017). They aim at identifying the impact of IFIs on the quality of budget forecasts and the compliance with fiscal rules, the two most common remits among fiscal councils. Their focus is on the more homogeneous IFIs within the EU. The paper uses the 2016 IMF Fiscal Council Dataset and applies a panel fixed-effect approach that tries to address concerns about self-selection. Although causality remains an issue, their empirical analysis provides evidence suggesting that the presence of an IFI is associated with more accurate and less optimistic budget forecasts as well as with greater compliance with fiscal rules.

Whether an IFI discourages governments from presenting overly optimistic macroeconomic and budget forecasts to ensure ex-ante compliance with fiscal rules and to justify ex post deviations with “unexpected” revenue shortfalls has also been addressed by earlier studies. Jonung and Larch (2006) show that forecast bias in the EU may be politically motivated and that forecasts by an independent authority, such as an independent fiscal council, would be preferable to forecasts provided by the Ministry of Finance. Frankel and Schreger (2013) find that official budget forecasts are over-optimistic, particularly in euro-area countries. They find that IFIs producing budget forecasts reduce the over-optimistic bias when countries do not comply with the 3% cap on budget deficits. In a same vein, Gilbert and de Jong (2017) present suggestive evidence that independent fiscal councils might help to reduce the optimism bias in budget forecasts caused by the 3% threshold of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) on the deficit ratios.

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Martins and Correia (2020) analyse 28 EU countries for the period 1999–2016 using a dynamic panel estimation approach. They employ three definitions of IFIs from the European Commission, the IMF, and a narrower definition adapted from Calmfors and Wren-Lewis (2011). Their results suggest that IFIs (independent of the underlying definition) improve fiscal policy making, e.g., fiscal policy being less pro-cyclical. They also investigate the complementarity between IFIs and other elements of fiscal frameworks. They find that fiscal rules are more important in improving the fiscal balance in countries with narrowly defined IFIs, while Medium Term Expenditure Frameworks (MTEFs) appear to be more relevant in countries without IFIs. They conclude that there is a complementary relationship between IFIs and the SGP deficit rule. While their empirical approach appears interesting, the issue of clustering of institutional features arises, i.e., countries tend to cluster to a set of institutional features that reinforce each other, making causal inference difficult.

Capraru et al. (2022) also study IFIs in the EU. Using a dynamic panel model approach, they find that IFIs contribute to improve the budget balance and to enhance fiscal rule compliance. IFIs appear to have these beneficial impacts primarily in countries with poorly designed fiscal responsibility norms. Their results also suggest that IFIs play a larger role in countries where these institutions have been established already for some time alluding to the role of experience and reputation.

Finally, Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis (2022) extend the empirical literature by investigating the role that IFIs play for reducing pro-cyclicality. Based on a panel of 35 advanced economies over the period 1990–2020, they study the relationship between the design elements of fiscal councils and fiscal policy. Using dynamic panel estimations, they find that fiscal councils with enhanced remit, strong independence and accountability, and sufficient resources can mitigate pro-cyclicality. A series of robustness checks suggests that the ability of fiscal councils to mitigate pro-cyclicality is particularly relevant in the EU and euro area countries, in countries with weak governance and especially after the global financial crisis.¹¹

Overall, empirical studies suggest that well-designed IFIs can complement fiscal rules and appear to promote sound fiscal policies. In particular, countries where IFIs tasked with assessing budget forecasts and monitoring fiscal rules are successful in delivering more accurate forecasts and better fiscal rule compliance. Design features such as appropriate resources, independence from politics, guaranteed and timely access to information and media visibility seem to contribute to the effectiveness of IFIs. In practice, however, many IFIs report problems with timely access to fiscal data and severe resource constraints undermining their mandate (OECD, 2020). While the emerging empirical studies have contributed to a better understanding of IFIs, the evidence on the effect of IFIs on fiscal performance is fairly limited. The limited temporal experience of IFIs makes it difficult to empirically assess their impact and provide robust evidence. Besides these data limitations, methodological challenges concerning measurement of effectiveness and the issues of reverse causality and institutional clustering remain. Put differently, the empirical results should be interpreted as robust conditional correlations rather than as causal relationships. Again, countries which are more concerned about fiscal discipline are also more likely to establish an IFI.

¹¹ Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis (2023) also find that fiscal councils with enhanced powers, including enhanced remit, independence and accountability and enhanced tasks and instruments, increase the probability to initiate a fiscal adjustment.

3.7 Fiscal rules, inequality and further political outcomes

Research into the effects of fiscal rules has primarily focused on their fiscal impact. Possible unwanted side effects of fiscal rules are largely unexplored. For instance, governments attempting to abide by a fiscal rule might curb social expenditure. The paper by Nerlich and Reuter (2013) reports that fiscal rules have a negative impact on expenditures on social protection in the EU. In the same vein, Dahan and Strawczynski (2013) found negative effects of fiscal rules on the ratio of social transfers to government consumption in OECD countries. This, in turn, could increase income inequality and imply social costs. If fiscal rules crowd out social expenditures, it is crucial to ask whether they cause increasing inequality.

Hartwig and Sturm (2019) innovatively test this hypothesis with data from the Standardised World Income Inequality Database (SWIID) and a set of fiscal rules dummy variables for EU countries. The SWIID database contains information on market Gini coefficients (which measure inequality in a country before redistribution through taxes and transfers), net Gini coefficients (which measure inequality after redistribution, i.e., using disposable income measures) as well as ‘redistribution’ defined as the difference between market and net Gini coefficients. In the empirical analysis for 24 EU countries for the period 1975–2012, they find that after “hard” fiscal rules have been in place for several years (i.e., expenditure or balanced budget rules that include sanctions and/or automatic correction mechanisms), redistribution declines, leading to an increase in inequality based on disposable income measures.

Combes et al. (2019) emphasise several transmission channels from fiscal rules to income inequality. First, by impacting the budget balance, second, through fiscal consolidation programmes, and third, by affecting pro-cyclicality and government borrowing. They study the impact of fiscal rules on inequality for developing countries. Analysing a panel of 84 developing countries for the period 1990–2015, propensity score matching estimations reveal that countries that adopted fiscal rules experience a decrease in their income inequality. The effect is robust to a wide set of alternative measurement and specifications. Interestingly, this result contrasts with the findings of Hartwig and Sturm (2019). One possible explanation can be seen in the different country samples under study, in particular their different state of economic and institutional development.

Fiscal rules are often considered a tool to depoliticise fiscal policy and perhaps the political system more broadly by forcing political parties to adopt increasingly similar fiscal policy positions. However, it could be that exactly because fiscal rules are thought to constrain fiscal policy, and therefore potentially constrain redistribution, they should themselves be contested and lead to conflict about the prioritisation of scarce public resources. This conflict follows the traditional political left-right scale. Aaskoven (2020) explores whether fiscal rules cause political parties to adopt more similar ideological positions. Using party manifestos data from 185 elections in 32 OECD countries for 1985–2012, he finds little evidence that fiscal rules reduce the level of political polarisation between parties. At the same time, fiscal rules do neither seem to fuel political conflict nor increase political polarisation.

Gamalerio and Trombetta (2023) go one step further and relate fiscal rules to the quality of politicians. They highlight the basic trade-off that introducing fiscal rules as a commitment device to fiscal discipline also implies reducing flexibility and thus discretionary policy making. This may

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alleviate public spending directed to particular interest groups, but it may also affect the composition of the pool of politicians as the value of holding political office under fiscal rules with restricted policy choices is lower. Using data on Italian municipalities from 1993 to 2012, they employ a difference-in-discontinuity design to study the removal of fiscal rules for municipalities below 5000 inhabitants in 2001. They take educational attainment as a proxy for competence. They provide evidence for a negative effect of fiscal rules on mayoral candidates' education. More concretely, fiscal rules induce a 10-percentage point reduction in the share of mayoral candidates with a university degree. Furthermore, they find that fiscal rules bring about a similar reduction in the probability of electing a mayor with a post-secondary education.

Taken together, the initial studies on the relationship between fiscal rules, inequality and further political outcomes enrich the discussion towards a broader assessment of fiscal rules. These emerging lines of research are still evolving and further evidence is needed.

3.8 Further considerations

We discuss issues that came up at several instances, including the importance of political commitment, the issue of fiscal rule compliance, vertical effects and the role of transparency.

Political commitment to fiscal rules

The relationship between fiscal frameworks and policy outcomes is complex and the strength of institutions is only one of many factors that impact on outcomes in shaping policies (IMF, 2014). In terms of fiscal rules, the empirical literature suggests that they work as a commitment device. However, the debate continues about which types of rules are most effective and in which institutional environment. A promising analysis in this direction is presented by Asatryan et al. (2018) emphasising the importance of anchoring fiscal rules at the constitutional level as the most binding commitment device. This points again to the argument that fiscal rules may only be effective when they come with strong political commitment, ownership or a strong institutional context that support sound fiscal policy making (Wyplosz, 2012). An example for strong political commitment and broad political acceptance is the experience in Switzerland where citizens voted with a vast majority in favour of adopting a debt brake within a system of fiscal federalism providing institutional checks to promote sound fiscal policies (for an overview, see Baur et al., 2013; Salvi et al., 2020).

Compliance with fiscal rules

Political commitment to and ownership of fiscal rules matters for their enforceability. A case in point is the experience from the EU fiscal framework, where political commitment and ownership are considered relatively weak. Research has started to investigate (non-)compliance with fiscal rules, i.e., how closely the fiscal aggregates considered match the targets defined by the fiscal rule. For instance, Reuter (2015) finds for eleven EU countries between 1992 and 2014 that only in half of the sample period countries actually complied with fiscal rules. He suggests that fiscal rules represent a sort of point of reference for sound fiscal policy, rather than effective and accurate constraints. Interestingly, the convergence towards numerical fiscal rules takes place from above and from below the defined fiscal constraint. Extending this work, Reuter (2019) innovatively

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studies the determinants of fiscal rule (non-)compliance at the national level for the member states of the EU-28 and the period 1995–2015. The empirical analysis suggests that, for instance, independent monitoring and enforcement bodies enshrined in the fiscal framework (like IFIs or courts) are associated with a higher probability of rule compliance. Delgado-Téllez et al. (2017) and Reuter (2019) also show that non-compliance with fiscal rules is related to more fragmented governments and is more likely in election years. Based on the fiscal rule compliance tracker issued by the Secretariat of the European Fiscal Board (Larch and Santacroce, 2020), Larch et al. (2023) very recently document the moderate compliance with the key elements of the EU fiscal framework. They show that, on average, EU member states were compliant in just over half of the cases. Differences in member states' compliance are substantial and persistent, and non-compliance is pro-cyclical.

Vertical effects of fiscal rules between different levels of government

Another important question barely addressed is whether in countries with multiple levels of government and with fiscal rules applied only at one level, vertical fiscal burden shifting takes place. For instance, a recent study by Burret and Feld (2018b) finds no vertical effects of fiscal rules in Swiss cantons, i.e., there appears to be no efforts to circumvent fiscal discipline at one level of government by shifting the burden to other levels of government. They apply a difference-in-differences estimation and find that cantonal fiscal rules hardly impact average local finances. This holds even in conditions that make vertical effects most likely, i.e., in times of fiscal shocks at the upper level of government. The authors argue that the overall fiscal framework plays an important role for their findings, in particular, the fiscal autonomy for the lower levels of government. Salvi et al. (2020) confirm this finding when studying the debt brake at the federal level of Switzerland.

Fiscal transparency

Another element that has been taken up recently in several studies is the role of (fiscal) transparency for fiscal rules and fiscal performance. De Renzio and Wehner (2017) present a first review on (mostly cross-country) studies that analyse the impact of fiscal transparency on various outcomes, including corruption and fiscal performance. Fiscal transparency is also a key economic rationale for independent fiscal institutions. Moreover, fiscal transparency has been recently argued to be an important precondition for fiscal rules to be effective (Gootjes and de Haan, 2022b). Transparency also relates to the importance of the overall institutional quality (Bergman and Hutchison, 2015, Bergman et al., 2016).

4. Concluding remarks

This paper presents a comprehensive review on the impact of fiscal rules. With a view to policy implications, the review offers a non-technical discussion of the studies' key results. The review points to the underlying data and selectively highlights refined empirical approaches and their methodological limitations.

The literature has made substantial progress in underpinning the role of fiscal rules as a key element of the institutional framework. This survey, first, shows that fiscal rules are positively related to fiscal performance, including improved budget balances, lower public spending volatility and lower debt. Second, fiscal rules contribute to more accurate budget forecasts and more favourable sovereign bond ratings. Third, the evidence suggests that fiscal rules do not principally undermine public investment and do not increase the pro-cyclicality bias in fiscal policy making. Moreover, there is promising work that studies the interaction of fiscal rules and the broader institutional context, highlighting that fiscal rules and government effectiveness can be considered as institutional complements or – beyond a certain threshold of institutional quality - as institutional substitutes. In a similar vein, there is emerging evidence on IFIs that appear to complement fiscal rules. Finally, there is initial work on the negative side effects that fiscal rules may have on inequality and other political outcomes.

While research uses cutting-edge empirical methods, causality remains a concern in the analysis of fiscal rules, in particular, since governments that are more concerned with sound fiscal policies and fiscal sustainability are also more likely to adopt and implement fiscal rules. Thus, empirical results may present upper bound estimates and have to be interpreted with caution.

The literature review informs the debate on more resilient public finances in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the energy crisis, where fiscal frameworks are put to a test, as countries activated escape clauses or temporarily suspended their fiscal rules. A case in point is the debate on the reform of the EU fiscal framework. The discussion demonstrates the importance of (i) reducing complexity of fiscal frameworks to increase ownership and enforceability, while safeguarding their flexibility to ensure counter-cyclical policies and (ii) a stronger medium to long-term perspective to ensure debt sustainability (see e.g., European Commission, 2021, Cuerpo et al., 2022). The review also informs the policy debate more generally: The empirical evidence indicates that there are good reasons to keep well-designed fiscal rules unchanged even though there appear to be ever more areas for policy action, including demands for more public spending.

There are several directions for future research. A first direction may look more closely at further elements of fiscal frameworks. Besides IFIs, promising initial work is presented on medium-term expenditure frameworks (Vlaicu et al., 2014) and accrual accounting (Christofzik, 2019; Dorn et al., 2021). Broadening the set of outcomes under study is a second direction towards a wider economic policy assessment of fiscal rules. For instance, future analysis framing the effectiveness of fiscal institutions could look at how fiscal rules contribute to trust in government. A closely related dimension is how fiscal rules relate to government efficiency. A first explorative analytical framework is presented by Barbier-Gauchard et al. (2023), while an initial empirical study is carried out by Christl et al. (2020). Moreover, the link between fiscal rules and the composition of public spending deserves more attention, including the analysis of crowding out effects (e.g., Dahan and Strawczynski, 2013) or the impact of fiscal rules on key public spending areas, such as health spending (e.g., Brändle and Colombier, 2016; Schakel et al., 2018).

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Appendix A: Tables and boxes

Table A 1: Overview of selected empirical studies on the effectiveness of fiscal rules

Authors	Objective	Method	Data basis	Key results
Fiscal rules and traditional fiscal performance indicators				
Debrun et al. (2008)	Impact of fiscal rules on fiscal performance	Dynamic panel estimation methods (among others bias-corrected LSDV)	25 EU countries, 1990-2005	Budget balance and debt rules contribute to limiting the budget deficit. They argue that the evidence suggests that causality runs from fiscal rules to fiscal behaviour.
Nerlich and Reuter (2013)	Impact of fiscal framework elements (fiscal rules, IFIs, MTEF) on fiscal outcomes	Dynamic panel estimation approach (bias-corrected LSDV)	27 EU countries, 1990-2012 Datasets from the European Commission, the OECD, the IMF and an ESCB dataset on national fiscal frameworks	Fiscal rules are related to lower public expenditures and revenues, such that the primary balance improves. Fiscal rules have restrictive impact on social benefit spending, compensation of public employees, public services and defence expenditures.
Fall et al. (2015)	Design of debt targets and impact of fiscal frameworks on fiscal performance.	Panel estimation approach	30 OECD countries, 20 years, OECD database and IMF fiscal institutions dataset	Fiscal rules are related to improved fiscal performance. IFIs appear to limit spending when interacted with a balanced budget rule.
Cordes et al. (2015)	Impact of expenditure rules on fiscal outcomes	Dynamic panel estimation approach (bias-corrected LSDV)	29 advanced and developing countries, 1985-2013, IMF fiscal institutions dataset.	Expenditure rules are associated with spending control, counter-cyclical fiscal policy and improved fiscal discipline. Expenditure rules are associated with lower expenditure volatility and higher investment efficiency.
Badinger and Reuter (2017)	Impact of fiscal rules on fiscal outcomes (fiscal balance, sovereign bonds, GDP volatility)	Panel estimation approach, instrumental variable approach	74 countries, 1985 – 2012, IMF fiscal rule index.	Countries with more rigorous fiscal rules show a better budgetary balance, lower interest rate spread for bonds and lower GDP volatility.
Asatryan et al. (2018)	Impact of constitutional-level fiscal rules on probability of sovereign debt crisis and fiscal performance	Difference-in-differences estimation approach and synthetic control method for case study countries	Between 58 and 132 countries, historical data back to 19 th century, case studies from Brazil, Cape Verde, Chile, Gabon, Panama, and Peru, Rwanda, Switzerland, and Ukraine	Constitutional budget-balance rules lead to a reduced probability of sovereign debt crises and decreases in the debt-to-GDP ratio, most of these consolidations are explained by decreasing public expenditures.
Pfeil and Feld (2018)	Impact of Swiss debt brake on budgetary aggregates.	Synthetic Control Method (SCM)	Swiss federal budget data; 1995-2007, 23 OECD countries	Swiss debt brake improves the budget balance by 3.6 percentage points on average on a post intervention period of 5 years. No clear results emerge for debt ratio due to data restriction.
Salvi et al. (2020)	Impact of Swiss debt brake on budgetary aggregates (extending study by Pfeil and Feld, 2018)	Synthetic Control Method (SCM)	Swiss federal budget data; 1980-2010, 34 OECD countries.	Swiss debt brake decreases debt by 19.7 percentage points after 7 years. No evidence is found for the decline in federal debt ratio being due to debt relocation to the subnational level or reduction in general investment spending on the federal level.
Burret and Feld (2018a)	Impact of fiscal rules on fiscal performance and potential side effects	Panel estimation approach	26 Swiss cantons, 1980-2011	Fiscal rules are related to lower public deficits. Fiscal rules are related to evasion into unconstrained accounts. Political budget cycles depend on the institutional context.
Caselli and Reynaud (2020)	Impact of fiscal rules on fiscal balances	Instrumental variable approach	142 countries, 1985-2015, IMF fiscal institutions dataset	Fiscal rules are related to lower deficits. This relationship disappears when endogeneity is taken into account. With an index of fiscal rules' design, well-designed rules improve fiscal balances.
Bergman et al. (2016)	National fiscal rules, government effectiveness and sustainable public finances	Panel estimation approach (GMM)	27 EU countries, 1990-2012, IMF dataset on fiscal institutions	Fiscal rules reduce structural primary deficits at all levels of government efficiency. Effect is smaller as government efficiency increases. Balanced budget rules are the most effective rules.
Fiscal rules and budget forecasts				
Luechinger and Schaltegger (2013)	Impact of fiscal rules on projected and realised deficits	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time-specific influences	26 Swiss cantons, 1984-2005	Fiscal rules lower the probability of projected and realised deficits with the former effect being twice as large. Fiscal rules increase the accuracy of projections.
Chatagny (2015)	Impact of finance minister ideology and fiscal rules on tax revenue predictions errors	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time-specific influences	26 Swiss cantons, 1980-2007	A more left-wing finance minister produces more conservative forecasts. Fiscal rules reduce the effect of ideology on revenue projection errors.
Picchio and Santolini (2020)	Impact of the domestic stability pact on the accuracy of budget forecasts	Difference-in-discontinuities	Database on local public finance by Italian Department of Territorial and Internal Affairs; 1991 census data "Atlante Statistico dei Comuni" (Istat)	Relaxing fiscal rules has a sizeable causal impact on budget forecast errors, e.g. revenue (expenditure) forecast errors for municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants are 26% (22%) larger than those of municipalities just above the cut-off.

Authors	Objective	Method	Data basis	Key results
Mancini and Tommasino (2023)	Impact of expenditure rule on expenditure forecasts at the local government level in Italy	Difference-in-discontinuities	Database on local public finance by Italian Department of Territorial and Internal Affairs; 1991 census data "Atlante Statistico dei Comuni" (Istat)	Italian municipalities tend to systematically overestimate plans on capital expenditures. Municipalities subject to a newly enacted capital spending rule significantly reduce over-optimism in expenditure planning.
Fiscal rules and sovereign bond ratings				
Iara and Wolff (2014)	Relationship between numerical fiscal rules and risk premia	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time-specific influences	11 euro-area countries, 1999–2009, EC fiscal rule index	No significant effect of fiscal rules on risk spreads, significant impact if interacted with the market risk aversion.
Afonso and Guimarães (2015)	Impact of numerical fiscal rules on budget balances and sovereign yield	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time specific influences	27 EU countries between 1990 and 2011, EC's and the IMF fiscal rule index	Fiscal rules are related to lower budget deficits. Countries with stricter fiscal rules experience lower sovereign bond yields.
Afonso and Jalles (2019)	Impact of fiscal rules on sovereign bond spreads	Panel estimation approach	34 advanced countries and 19 emerging market economies, 1980–2016, IMF dataset on fiscal institutions	Impact of fiscal rules on sovereign yield spreads is negative, stemming essentially from advanced economies. In recessions, a fiscal rule is related to reduced bond risk premia. Independent monitoring of compliance reduces sovereign spreads.
Thornton and Vasilakis (2017)	Relationship between numerical fiscal rules and sovereign risk premia	Panel estimation approach, propensity score matching methods	67 advanced and developing countries, 1985–2012, IMF fiscal institutions dataset	Adoption of FRs is related to lower sovereign risk premia.
Feld et al. (2017)	Impact of fiscal frameworks on financial market ratings	Panel estimation approach	Swiss subnational government bonds, 1981-2007	A not fully credible no-bailout commitment can entail high costs for the potential guarantor.
Sawadogo (2020)	Exploring the role of fiscal rules in terms of improving access to financial markets for developing countries	Panel estimation approach including entropy balancing	36 developing countries, 1993-2014	Fiscal rules reduce sovereign bond spreads and increase sovereign debt ratings. Balanced budget rules and debt rules improve access to financial markets, while expenditures rules appear to improve financial market access only in combination with multi-year expenditure ceilings.
Hansen (2020)	Impact of transmission channels (financial market discipline vs. political competition) of fiscal rules	Panel estimation (GMM methods)	69 countries, 1990-2008, IMF and OBI fiscal transparency index, IMF fiscal rule index	Budget balances are improved not as a consequence of financial markets, but when the level of political competition and civil society engagement is high.
Fiscal rules and public investment				
Perée and Väilä (2005)	Assess determinants of public investment and to what extent fiscal deficit rules in EMU affect public investment	Panel estimation approach; country-specific models	14 EU countries, 1970-2003	Statistically significant determinants of public investment include level of GDP, budgetary situation and fiscal consolidation efforts, no significant relation between fiscal rules and public investment
Dahan and Strawczynsky (2013)	Effects of fiscal rules on changes of both social transfers and public investment in relation to government consumption.	Panel estimation approach / difference-in-differences	22 OECD countries, 1960-2010	Fiscal rules have a negative effect on social transfers unless strong commitment to social security coverage is enacted in law. Negative influence of fiscal rules on public investment cannot be confirmed.
Afonso and Jalles (2015)	Assess relevance of fiscal components for private and public investment	Panel estimation approach	95 developed and developing countries, 1970-2008 / EU-countries 1990-2008	Interest payments and subsidies have a negative effect on private and public investment. Stronger (numerical) fiscal rules decrease public investment.
Delgado-Téllez et al. (2021)	Test the two classical hypotheses for declining public investment (crowding out by social spending; fiscal rules)	Panel regression and factor analysis; local projections	22 OECD countries, 1960-2015, OECD social expenditure database, AMECO and IMF databases.	Social spending is interpreted as a structural driver for the observed crowding-out effects; fiscal rules are negatively related to public investment, specifically in periods of fiscal consolidation, whereby flexibility clauses of fiscal rules mitigate the effect.
Ardanz et al. (2021)	Explain public investment during fiscal consolidations in relation to the design of fiscal rules.	Panel estimation approach	75 advanced and emerging economies, 1990-2018	In countries with either no or with a rigid fiscal rule public investments are significantly reduced in episodes of fiscal adjustment, whereas the negative effect on public investment vanishes in countries with flexible fiscal rules.
Wijmsman and Crombez (2021)	Assess the effects of national fiscal rules on public investment	Dynamic panel estimation approach by LSDVC and GMM.	28 EU countries; 1997-2016, European Commission fiscal rules index	Fiscal rules decrease public investment: Significant negative coefficients of fiscal rules index in both models.

Authors	Objective	Method	Data basis	Key results
Vinturis (2022)	Assessing different fiscal rules (expenditure, debt, budget balance) on total public spending, decomposed in consumption, investment and ratio of both	Panel estimation approach including entropy balancing	185 countries, 1985-2015	Fiscal rules reduce public consumption and leave public investment unchanged. Only debt and balanced budget rules reduce total spending and increase investment-to-consumption ratio.
Feld et al. (2021)	(1) Relationship between a cut in the central bank interest rate and the development of capital expenditure; (2) influence of fiscal rules on investment spending under low interest rates	Two panel-based regression models / difference-in-differences	26 cantons, 376 municipalities (> 5000 pop.), 2009-2018; Swiss Federal Finance Administration	Negative correlation between capital cost and public investment for both panels. No evidence is found for fiscal rules constraining investment (or hampering expansion) after cut in interest rate. Cantons with stricter fiscal rules tend to expand their investments more.
Jürgens (2022)	Assess whether fiscal rules affect public investment with special regard to cyclical and different types / features of fiscal rules	Panel estimation approach	23 EU countries, 1985-2019	Public investment in the country sample is pro-cyclical, specifically in downturns. Fiscal rules without flexibility features constrain public investment.
Fiscal rules and pro-cyclicity				
Sacchi and Salotti (2015)	Assess whether fiscal rules impact governments' ability to stabilize the economy via discretionary fiscal policy making	Fixed effects and System-GMM estimator	21 OECD countries, 1985–2012, IMF Fiscal institutions dataset	The use of discretionary fiscal policy, particularly of government consumption, is related to higher output volatility. With fiscal rules, discretionary policy tends to become more output-stabilising. Balanced budgets rules rather than for revenue, expenditure or debt rules seem to be more effective.
Nerlich and Reuter (2015)	Impact of fiscal rules on 'fiscal space' and how their impact determines cyclical policy	Panel estimation approach	EU-27 countries, 1990-2014	Fiscal rules are correlated with fiscal space, i.e. they help to create leeway for discretionary fiscal policy. Fiscal rules constrain excessive spending by discretionary fiscal policy and tend to curb pro-cyclical in discretionary fiscal policy.
Combes et al. (2017)	Assess the response of fiscal policy to the business cycle, especially in cases of high public debt.	Panel estimation approach	56 advanced, emerging and developing economies, 1990-2011	Most fiscal rules enhance counter-cyclicity, conditional on the level of debt. In environment of high public debt-to-GDP ratios, fiscal policy turns pro-cyclical and is not curbed by most fiscal rules or even exacerbated (escape clauses!). Deficit rules and/or 'golden rules' for investment can help to mitigate such effects.
Guerguil et al. (2017)	Assess the impact of different types of flexible fiscal rules on the cyclical policy with special regard to investment spending.	Panel estimation approach including propensity scores-matching (PSM)	167 advanced and developing economies, 1990-2012	Investment-friendly rules reduce pro-cyclicity of overall spending and investment spending. Expenditure rules and cyclically-adjusted deficit rules contribute to counter-cyclical changes for overall spending, but have a pro-cyclical effect on investment spending.
Manescu and Bova (2020)	Fiscal rules' design and pro-cyclicity of fiscal policy	Panel estimation approach	28 EU countries, 1999-2016, EC's fiscal governance database.	Pro-cyclical bias is lower with expenditure rules. Well-designed expenditure rules further reduce pro-cyclicity.
Bergman and Hutchison (2015)	Impact of fiscal rules and government effectiveness on pro-cyclical fiscal policy	Panel estimation approach (GMM)	81 countries, 1985–2012, World Bank indicators for government effectiveness, IMF dataset on fiscal institutions	Government efficiency alone is not sufficient to reduce pro-cyclicity, the combination of fiscal rules and high government efficiency fosters counter-cyclical policies.
Larch et al. (2021)	Fiscal rules and counter-cyclical fiscal policy	Dynamic panel estimation approach (including LSDV and GMM)	36 EU and non-EU countries, using data up to 2017, with observations starting earliest in the 1960s.	Volatility of output gap estimates is not a convincing explanation for pro-cyclical policies. Fiscal rule non-compliance and public debt foster pro-cyclical fiscal policy.
Reuter et al. (2022)	Assessing the effect of national fiscal rules on the conduct of discretionary fiscal policy and thus on macroeconomic stability.	Panel estimation with two-stage least squares approach	28 EU countries, 1996-2015	Strong fiscal rules limit fiscal volatility thus contributing to reduce macroeconomic volatility. The observation applies for budget balance rules and expenditure rules. The finding holds also in cases with reduced compliance to fiscal rules serving then as benchmark.
Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis (2023)	Impact of the fiscal institutions' design on fiscal adjustment	Panel estimation approach	40 advanced economies, 1990-2020	Well-designed fiscal rules which incorporate both strict and flexible features increase both the probability to initiate and to successfully conclude a fiscal adjustment. Key design elements are: a cyclically-adjusted budget balance target, a well specified escape clause, strict enforcement, strong legal base and multi-annual spending limits.

Authors	Objective	Method	Data basis	Key results
Gootjes and de Haan (2022b)	Do fiscal rules combined with fiscal transparency impact budget balance and make fiscal adjustment and its success more likely?	Dynamic panel estimation approach	73 advanced and developing economies, 2003-2013	Fiscal rules improve the budget balance only when the level of fiscal transparency exceeds a minimum threshold. As to fiscal adjustments, fiscal rules make the occurrence and success of fiscal adjustments more likely but, again, only when the level of fiscal transparency is sufficiently high.
Fiscal rules and independent fiscal institutions				
Debrun and Kumar (2008)	Impact of fiscal rules and IFIs on fiscal outcomes.	Panel estimation approaches	EU-15 countries, 1990–2004, European Commission data	Fiscal rules are associated with higher fiscal performance. IFIs, with strong independence, are associated with stronger budget balances.
Nerlich and Reuter (2013)	Impact of fiscal framework elements (fiscal rules, IFIs, MTEF) on fiscal outcomes	Dynamic panel estimation approach (bias-corrected LSDV)	27 EU countries, 1990-2012 Datasets from the EC, the OECD, the IMF and an ESCB dataset on national fiscal frameworks	Fiscal rules are related to an improved primary balance. Effect is strengthened when fiscal rules are enacted in law or constitution and supported by IFIs and effective MTEFs.
Fall et al. (2015)	Design of debt targets and impact of fiscal frameworks on fiscal performance	Panel estimation approach	30 OECD countries, period of 20 years, OECD database and IMF fiscal institutions dataset	Fiscal rules are related to an improved fiscal performance. Impact of IFIs on the primary balance is not significant. IFIs limit spending when interacted with a balanced budget rule.
Debrun and Kinda (2017)	Impact of IFIs on fiscal outcomes	Dynamic panel estimation approach (bias-corrected LSDV)	58 advanced and emerging countries over the 1990–2011, IMF dataset on IFIs	Fiscal rules are related to better fiscal performance. IFIs are related to improved fiscal performance when certain features of IFIs apply (independence, monitoring compliance, forecasting, media impact).
Beetsma et al. (2019)	Impact of IFIs on the quality of fiscal forecasts and fiscal rule compliance	Panel estimation controlling for unobserved country and time-specific influences	27 EU countries, 1995-2015, IMF dataset on IFIs (2016 vintage), OECD IFI database and EC data.	IFIs are associated with more accurate and less optimistic budgetary forecasts. IFIs are related to greater fiscal rule compliance.
Martins and Correia (2020)	Impact of IFI on fiscal outcomes	Dynamic panel estimation approach (bias-corrected LSDV); Analysis of subcategories of IFIs and samples with/without IFIs	28 EU countries, 1999-2016; several data sets, including EC and IMF datasets on fiscal institutions	With IFIs, fiscal policy measures are less pro-cyclical and more concerned with debt sustainability.
Capraru et al. (2022)	Fiscal implications and influence of IFIs on fiscal policy	Dynamic panel estimation approach	EU member countries, 2000-2019	IFIs contribute to improve the budget balance and enhance fiscal rule compliance, primarily in countries with poorly designed fiscal responsibility norms. IFIs play a larger role after operation for some time allowing them to build up experience and reputation.
Chrysanthakopoulos and Tagkalakis (2022)	Exploring the role of IFIs in reducing pro-cyclicality	Dynamic panel estimation approach	35 advanced economies, 1990-2020	Stronger fiscal councils can mitigate pro-cyclicality. The ability of fiscal councils to mitigate pro-cyclicality is particularly relevant in the EU and euro area countries, in countries with weak governance and especially after the global financial crisis.
Fiscal rules, income inequality and further political outcomes				
Hartwig and Sturm (2019)	Impact of fiscal rules on redistribution and income inequality	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time specific influences	24 EU countries, 1975-2012, Standardized World Income Inequality Database and a new set of fiscal rules variables.	Strict fiscal rules that have been in place for several years are related to a decrease in redistribution, leading to an increase in inequality based on disposable income.
Combes et al. (2019)	Impact of fiscal rules on inequality in developing countries.	Propensity scores-matching method (PSM)	84 developing countries, 1990-2015	Countries that adopted fiscal rules experience a significant decrease in their income inequality.
Aaskoven (2020)	Impact of fiscal rules on political polarisation of parties	Panel estimation approach controlling for unobserved country and time specific influences	32 OECD countries, 1985-2012, party manifestos data from 185 elections, IMF fiscal institution database	No evidence that fiscal rules reduce the level of political polarisation between parties.
Gamalerio and Trombetta (2023)	Explore relationship between fiscal rules and quality of politicians	Difference-in-discontinuities design, regression analyses	Data on Italian municipalities, 1993-2012	Fiscal rules induce a 10 percentage point reduction in the share of mayoral candidates with a university degree. Fiscal rules bring about a similar reduction in the probability of electing mayors with post-secondary education.

Box A1: Empirical methods to address the causal impact of fiscal rules

The analysis of the effects of institutions, including the effects of fiscal rules on fiscal aggregates, introduces a subtle yet significant challenge known as endogeneity. In the context of fiscal rules, endogeneity arises from the intricate interplay between fiscal rules and the institutional context. When investigating the impact of fiscal rules on a country's fiscal aggregates, it is conceivable that fiscal aggregates themselves (e.g., an increase in the public debt level) influence the introduction of fiscal rules. Moreover, it is challenging to disentangle whether changes in the institutional context drive the adoption of new rules or if the rules themselves instigate institutional shifts. This mutual influence – often referred to as reverse causality or omitted variable bias – creates a circular relationship that complicates causal inference. Neglecting this form of endogeneity can lead to misleading results. In particular, one might erroneously attribute effects on fiscal aggregates solely to fiscal rules, overlooking the potential contribution of other fiscal policies and broader institutions.

To address endogeneity and disentangle the cause-and-effect relationships between fiscal rules and fiscal aggregates, a range of refined econometric methods are applied:

- **Panel fixed-effects estimation:** This technique helps to account for different often unobserved, though fixed properties of countries or time periods. It helps to control for omitted variables that may drive both fiscal rules and fiscal aggregates. However, fixed effects only help to control for time and/or country invariant factors, potentially leaving some sources of endogeneity unaddressed, like (unobserved) changes in the quality of institutions or countries' social norms.
- **Difference-in-Differences (DiD):** The DiD approach compares changes in outcomes over time between a treatment group (e.g., countries with fiscal rules) and a control group (countries without rules). By observing the differential changes before and after the introduction of fiscal rules, it aims to isolate the causal impact of these rules on fiscal aggregates. Potential biases can arise if there are factors that vary over time and that differentially affect the treatment and control groups.
- **Instrumental variables (IV):** In two-stage least-square regressions, IV are used to establish causal relationships by finding variables that affect fiscal rules but are unrelated to fiscal aggregates. They can help address endogeneity by breaking the link between fiscal rules and the institutional context. However, finding valid instruments can be challenging, and the validity of the results depends on the strength of the instruments.
- **Quasi-natural experiments:** Quasi-natural experiments encompass methods such as Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) and Differences-in-Discontinuities Design to exploit naturally occurring events to establish causality. For instance, abrupt and unexpected fiscal policy changes could provide insights into how stringent fiscal rules influence spending behaviour. While these experiments can help address endogeneity, their external validity, e.g., how the results for a specific institutional setting apply to other institutional settings is often subject to debate.
- **Propensity scores-matching:** This technique matches treated and untreated units (e.g., countries with/without fiscal rules) based on their propensity to experience the treatment (namely the introduction of fiscal rules). By comparing similar units, propensity scores-matching aims to mitigate endogeneity and selection bias (into treatment), e.g., fiscally conservative countries are more likely to adopt fiscal rules. However, results of propensity scores-matching can be sensitive to the choice of matching variables and the units might be subject to unobserved characteristics that cannot be matched properly.
- **Synthetic controls/entropy balancing:** These methods create a combination of untreated units to mimic the characteristics of a treated unit. This allows for a comparison between the actual outcome and a counterfactual scenario where, e.g., fiscal rules were not adopted. While these methods offer a way to address endogeneity, the accuracy of the synthetic control groups depends again on the choice of the variables adopted in the matching process.

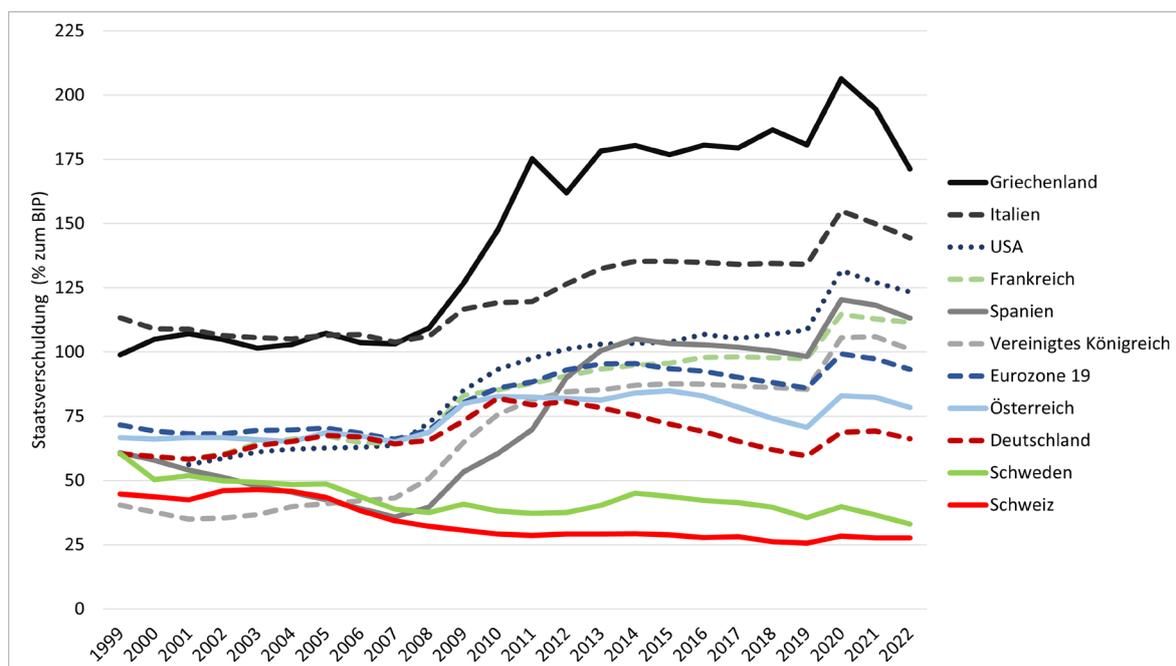
Appendix B: Introduction in German

Weltweit wurden die Volkswirtschaften von COVID-19 empfindlich getroffen. Um die wirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen dieser Krise zu mildern, reagierten die Staaten mit wirtschaftspolitischen Massnahmen in oft beispiellosem Umfang. In der Folge stieg die Staatsverschuldung der Länder beträchtlich an. Gleichzeitig ist festzustellen, dass erhebliche Unterschiede zwischen den Ländern hinsichtlich Höhe und Dynamik der öffentlichen Verschuldung bestehen (Grafik 1).

Fiskalregeln spielen eine wichtige Rolle für eine solide und nachhaltige Finanzpolitik sowie letztlich für die Resilienz der öffentlichen Haushalte. Fiskalregeln können als das wichtigste institutionelle Instrument betrachtet werden, um das Erreichen dieser Ziele zu gewährleisten. Dabei wird insbesondere hervorgehoben, dass Fiskalregeln zur Ausgabendisziplin der politischen Entscheidungsträger beitragen, das Vertrauen der Wirtschaftsakteure stärken und es erlauben, finanzpolitischen Spielraum zur Abfederung künftiger Schocks zu bilden.

Als Reaktion auf die COVID-19-Pandemie haben indes viele Länder ihre Fiskalregelwerke angepasst, indem sie beispielsweise Ausweichklauseln aktivierten oder ihre Fiskalregeln vorübergehend ausser Kraft setzten (z. B. Davoodi et al., 2022a). Angesichts des stärkeren Drucks auf die öffentlichen Finanzen und der erhöhten fiskalischen Risiken werden auch die Fiskalregelwerke verstärkt hinterfragt. Dies zumal die Staaten die wirtschaftliche Erholung mit der Konsolidierung des öffentlichen Haushalts bei oft bereits hoher Staatsverschuldung in Einklang bringen müssen. Gleichzeitig sehen sich die Länder mit anhaltendem Ausgabendruck zur Bewältigung struktureller Herausforderungen konfrontiert – etwa der Alterung der Bevölkerung, der Gesundheitsversorgung, der Landesverteidigung oder der Energie- und Klimawende. Anders gesagt: Krisen und strukturelle Entwicklungen stellen die Widerstandsfähigkeit der Fiskalregelwerke auf die Probe.

Grafik 1: Staatsverschuldung in ausgewählten Ländern der OECD, 1999–2022

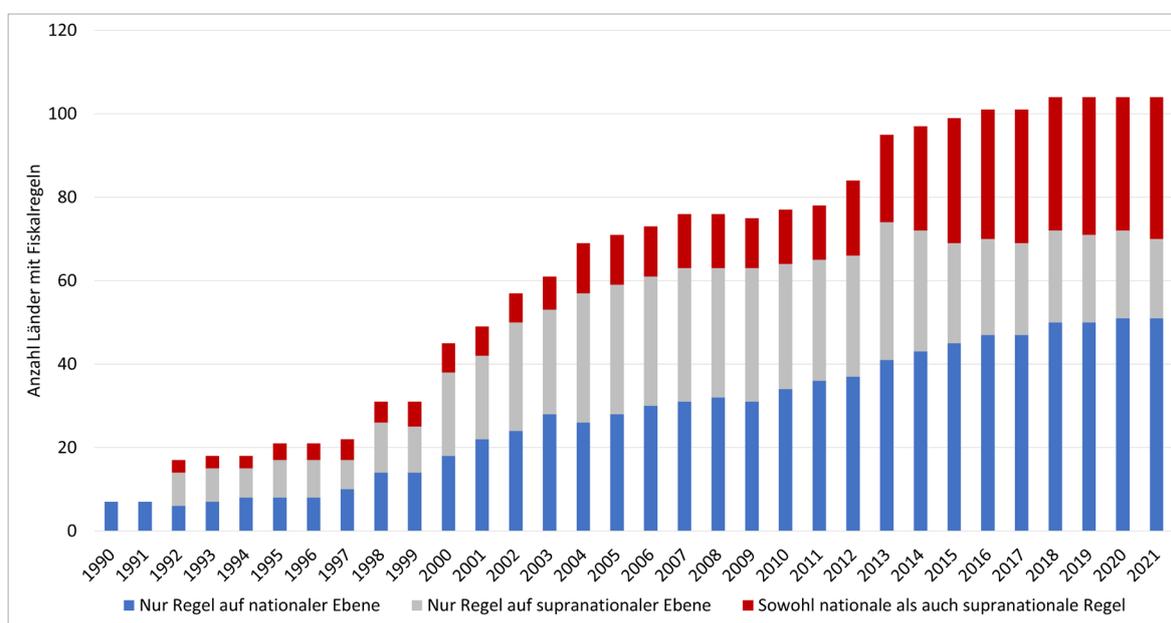


Quelle: OECD.

Ein gutes Beispiel ist die laufende Debatte über die Reform des EU-Fiskalregelwerks. Das Fiskalregelwerk ist vor rund 25 Jahren eingeführt worden, 2020 wurde die allgemeine Ausweichklausel aktiviert und seine Wiederinkraftsetzung ist derzeit ausstehend. Ein prominentes Beispiel für Fiskalregeln auf nationaler Ebene ist die Einführung der Schuldenbremse in der Schweiz vor 20 Jahren. Sie wurde von einer grossen Mehrheit in einer Volksabstimmung über ihre Verankerung auf Verfassungsstufe angenommen. Die Schweizer Schuldenbremse diente später als Vorlage für die Schuldenbremse in Deutschland sowie für die Verschärfung des EU-Fiskalregelwerks nach der globalen Finanzkrise.

In den vergangenen Jahrzehnten hat eine wachsende Zahl von Ländern eine regelbasierte Finanzpolitik eingeführt. Im Jahr 2021 beläuft sich ihre Zahl auf über 100 (Grafik 2). Wenngleich sich die einzelnen Länder hinsichtlich Art und Zahl der angewendeten Fiskalregeln unterscheiden, ist eine Schuldenregel in Kombination mit einer unterstützenden Regel zum Haushaltsausgleich oder einer Ausgabenregel eine verbreitete Variante. Angesichts der wachsenden Zahl an Ländern, die Erfahrung mit einer regelbasierten Finanzpolitik aufweisen, und der anstehenden wirtschaftspolitischen Herausforderungen, ist eine umfassende Auswertung der empirischen Evidenz zu den Auswirkungen von Fiskalregeln angezeigt.

Grafik 2: Anwendung von Fiskalregeln seit 1990



Quelle: IMF Fiscal Rules Dataset – 1985–2021; Davoodi et al. (2022b).

Anmerkungen: Anzahl an Staaten mit mindestens einer Fiskalregel. 53 Staaten unterliegen supranationalen Regeln, welche oftmals nationale Fiskalregeln ergänzen. Dazu gehören die 27 EU Mitgliedsstaaten, 6 Staaten in der Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU), 8 Staaten in der West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), 6 Staaten in der Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), und 6 Staaten in der East Africa Economic and Monetary Community.

Für evidenzbasierte Politikentscheide geht der vorliegende Überblick zunächst auf den Zusammenhang zwischen Fiskalregeln und der Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen ein. Diese bemisst sich in erster Linie an der Entwicklung des Haushaltssaldos, der Einnahmen und Ausgaben sowie der Staatsverschuldung. Der Überblick umfasst auch Studien, die andere wichtige Aspekte analysieren,

so etwa der Einfluss von Fiskalregeln auf die Genauigkeit von Budgetprognosen, das Rating von Staatsanleihen, die öffentlichen Investitionen und die Zyklichkeit der Finanzpolitik. Darüber hinaus wird auf neuere Arbeiten eingegangen, welche die Fiskalregeln auf breitere politische Auswirkungen untersuchen. Ein umfassender Überblick über die verschiedenen Wirkungsdimensionen von Fiskalregeln fehlt derzeit in der Literatur. Spezifischere Übersichten wurden von Feld und Reuter (2017), von Burret und Feld (2014) mit Fokus auf der subnationalen Ebene der USA und der Schweiz sowie von Blesse et al. (2023) zu Fiskalregeln und öffentlichen Investitionen vorgelegt.

Der vorliegende Literaturüberblick umfasst wissenschaftliche Publikationen und neuere Arbeiten bedeutender internationaler Organisationen. Im Zentrum stehen empirische Studien, welche Fiskalregeln auf nationaler Ebene analysieren, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf den Volkswirtschaften der OECD oder der EU liegt. Für die EU-Länder überschneidet sich dies oft mit den empirischen Ergebnissen zu den EU-Fiskalregeln. Fallweise wird auch Evidenz aus subnationalen Gebietskörperschaften herangezogen. Ein Beispiel sind Studien zu den Schweizer Kantonen, die eine lange Tradition von Fiskalregeln und dezentralisierter Finanz- und Steuerautonomie aufweisen. Mit Blick auf die Politikberatung präsentiert der Literaturüberblick eine nicht-technische Diskussion der wichtigsten Ergebnisse der zugrunde liegenden Studien. Dabei wird auch auf die Datengrundlagen und die verwendeten empirischen Methoden sowie deren Grenzen eingegangen.

Der vorliegende Literaturüberblick zeigt, dass sich die empirische Literatur zu Fiskalregeln weiter differenziert hat und inzwischen Untersuchungen zu ganz unterschiedlichen Aspekten zur Beurteilung ihrer Effektivität vorliegen. Dabei sind erhebliche Fortschritte festzustellen, welche die Bedeutung von Fiskalregeln für die Gestaltung einer wirksamen Finanzpolitik untermauern.

Erstens findet sich eine relativ breit abgestützte empirische Evidenz dafür, dass Fiskalregeln die Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen positiv beeinflussen, dies bezogen auf Haushaltsaldo, öffentliche Einnahmen und Ausgaben, die Verstetigung der öffentlichen Ausgaben sowie die Staatsverschuldung (z. B. Fall et al., 2015; Badinger und Reuter, 2017; Caselli und Reynaud, 2020). Neuere empirische Beiträge differenzieren die Auswirkungen der Fiskalregeln zusätzlich nach Art und Ausgestaltung der zugrundeliegenden Regeln. Zweitens gibt es klare empirische Belege dafür, dass Fiskalregeln mit präziseren Budgetprognosen einhergehen, die für die Planung und die Glaubwürdigkeit der Finanzpolitik wesentlich sind (z. B. Luechinger und Schaltegger, 2013; Picchio und Santolini, 2020). Ein weiterer Literaturstrang liefert Belege für die positiven Effekte von Fiskalregeln auf das Rating von Staatsanleihen, was für die Bewertung der Finanzmärkte entscheidend ist. Dabei scheinen strenge Fiskalregeln wirksamer zu sein, vor allem unter unsicheren Finanzmarktbedingungen (z. B. Feld et al., 2017; Thornton und Vasilakis, 2017; Afonso und Jalles, 2019). Ein weiterer Forschungszweig legt nahe, dass Fiskalregeln die Investitionstätigkeit der öffentlichen Hand nicht grundsätzlich schwächen. Die öffentlichen Investitionen können aber gefährdet sein, wenn Fiskalregeln zu starr ausgestaltet sind, und zwar besonders in Zeiten der Haushaltskonsolidierung (z. B. Delgado-Télez et al., 2021; Ardanaz et al., 2021; Vinturis, 2022). Darüber hinaus zeigen empirische Ergebnisse, dass Fiskalregeln die Prozyklichkeit der Finanzpolitik nicht verstärken. Studien, die eine grosse Anzahl an Ländern untersuchen, zeigen, dass die Ausgestaltung der Fiskalregeln eine Rolle spielt und deren Wirkung auch vom wirtschaftlichen und institutionellen Kontext abhängt (z. B. Combes et al., 2017; Guerguil et al., 2017; Reuter et al., 2022).

Wird die Perspektive auf weitere Elemente des Fiskalregelwerks ausgedehnt, rückt eine Reihe von Forschungsarbeiten ins Blickfeld, die sich mit der Rolle 'Unabhängiger Fiskalinstitutionen' befassen ('Independent Fiscal Institutions' bzw. IFI). IFIs werden dabei als institutionelle Ergänzung zu Fiskalregeln verstanden. Erste empirische Studien zeigen, dass gut konzipierte IFIs die Wirkung von Fiskalregeln verstärken und zu besseren Haushaltssaldi sowie einer weniger prozyklischen Finanzpolitik beitragen. So zeigt sich, dass insbesondere Staaten, in denen IFIs Prognosen evaluieren und die Fiskalregeln überwachen, genauere Prognosen erstellen und die Fiskalregeln eher einhalten (z. B. Debrun und Kinda, 2017; Beetsma et al., 2019; Chrysanthakopoulos und Tagkalakis, 2022).

Schliesslich liegen auch Studien aus jüngerer Zeit vor, die gestützt auf die Erfahrungen mit Haushaltskonsolidierungen nach der globalen Finanzkrise auf mögliche negative Nebenwirkungen von Fiskalregeln hinweisen, beispielsweise im Hinblick auf Einkommensungleichheit (Hartwig und Sturm, 2019), politische Polarisierung (Aaskoven, 2020) oder Effekte politischer Selektion (Gamarerio und Trombetta, 2023). Diese Forschung befindet sich jedoch noch in einer frühen Phase.

Die empirische Literatur legt nahe, dass Fiskalregeln als Instrument für mehr Verbindlichkeit dienen und somit die Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen positiv beeinflussen. Hingegen besteht Uneinigkeit in der Frage, ob die Fiskalregeln tatsächlich eine disziplinierende Wirkung auf die Finanzpolitik entfalten. Methodisch betrachtet bedeutet ein positiver Zusammenhang zwischen Fiskalregeln und finanzpolitischer Disziplin nicht zwingend, dass dieser auch kausal ist. Dieser Zusammenhang kann auch den Umstand reflektieren, dass Regierungen, die ohnehin auf eine solide und tragbare Finanzpolitik achten, auch eher dazu neigen, Fiskalregeln einzuführen und umzusetzen. Der positive Zusammenhang kann aber auch darauf zurückzuführen sein, dass Regierungen eher Fiskalregeln einführen, wenn sie annehmen, dass diese erreichbar sind – etwa wenn sich Wirtschaft und öffentliche Finanzen nach einer Krise bereits erholen.

In diesem Kontext präsentieren Heinemann et al. (2018) eine erste Meta-Regressionsanalyse, welche 30 Studien zum Einfluss von Fiskalregeln auf die Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen auswertet. Die Studie folgert, dass Fiskalregeln eine einschränkende Wirkung auf die definierten Budgetgrössen entfalten. Diese Wirkung wird allerdings abgeschwächt, wenn die zugrundeliegenden Studien das Problem der Endogenität nicht angemessen berücksichtigen. Mit anderen Worten: Die empirischen Ergebnisse neigen dazu, den Einfluss von Fiskalregeln zu überschätzen. Ähnliche Bedenken sind angezeigt, wenn die Beziehung zwischen Fiskalregeln und unabhängigen Fiskalinstitutionen oder dem institutionellen Kontext untersucht wird. Um solche Vorbehalte zu entschärfen, verwenden jüngere Studien neuere empirische Ansätze zur Identifikation kausaler Zusammenhänge, darunter die Differenz-in-Differenzen-Methode, Instrumentalvariablen, quasi-natürliche Experimente oder auch Propensity-Scores-Matching.

Eine Schlüsselfrage ist, welche Fiskalregeln am wirksamsten sind und in welchem Kontext. Asatryan et al. (2018) betonen die Wichtigkeit, Fiskalregeln auf Verfassungsebene zu verankern: Dies steigert die Glaubwürdigkeit und trägt zu einer vorteilhafteren Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen bei. Gemäss der empirischen Evidenz erweisen sich vor allem Fiskalregeln zum Haushaltsausgleich sowie Ausgabenregeln als wirksam. Mit Blick auf die Ausgestaltung der Fiskalregeln legt die Empirie nahe, dass gut konzipierte Fiskalregeln die Entwicklung der öffentlichen Finanzen positiv beeinflussen, öffentliche Investitionen schützen und prozyklische Tendenzen in der Finanzpolitik abschwächen. Zu den wichtigsten Gestaltungselementen zählen eine starke rechtliche

Verankerung, verbindliche Vorgaben zur Regeldurchsetzung sowie Vorkehrungen für Flexibilität, die den Konjunkturzyklus berücksichtigen. Sodann liegen vielversprechende Arbeiten vor zur Wechselwirkung zwischen Fiskalregeln und dem breiteren institutionellen Kontext. Erste Studien weisen darauf hin, dass Fiskalregeln und eine effiziente öffentliche Verwaltung komplementär wirken im Hinblick auf eine weniger prozyklische Finanzpolitik (Bergman und Hutchison, 2015) und – ab einem bestimmten Effizienzniveau der öffentlichen Verwaltung – als Substitut gesehen werden können im Hinblick auf eine nachhaltige Verschuldung (Bergman et al., 2016). In ähnlicher Weise legen Gootjes und de Haan (2022b) nahe, dass ein Mindestmass an fiskalischer Transparenz erforderlich ist, damit Fiskalregeln wirken. Damit eng verbunden sind innovative Forschungsarbeiten, welche die Determinanten der (Nicht-)Einhaltung von Fiskalregeln untersuchen. Diese Studien weisen auf die Bedeutung von politischen und wirtschaftlichen Faktoren hin (z. B. Reuter, 2019; Larch et al., 2023).

Der vorliegende Literaturüberblick trägt zur Debatte über die Resilienz der öffentlichen Finanzen nach der COVID-19-Pandemie und der Energiekrise bei. Ein prominentes Beispiel ist die laufende Reformdiskussion des EU-Fiskalregelwerks. Diese Diskussion zeigt, wie wichtig es ist, (i) die Komplexität von Fiskalregeln zu reduzieren und gleichzeitig deren Flexibilität zu wahren, und (ii) die mittel- bis langfristige Perspektive in der Finanzpolitik zu stärken (z. B. European Commission, 2021, Cuerpo et al., 2022). Der Literaturüberblick trägt aber auch allgemeiner zur wirtschaftspolitischen Debatte bei: Er zeigt, dass es gute Gründe gibt, sorgfältig konzipierte Fiskalregeln unverändert zu belassen, selbst wenn es immer mehr Bereiche öffentlichen Handelns zu geben scheint, einschliesslich neuer Forderungen nach mehr öffentlichen Ausgaben. Darüber hinaus stellen die jüngeren Krisen die Widerstandsfähigkeit der Fiskalregelwerke zwar auf die Probe, liefern aber auch einen zusätzlichen Grund für Fiskalregeln: Länder, die in der Vergangenheit Fiskalregeln eingehalten haben, profitieren von einer niedrigeren Staatsverschuldung und verfügen so über mehr finanzpolitischen Spielraum, um auf künftige Krisen reagieren zu können.

Die vorliegende Arbeit ist wie folgt aufgebaut. Kapitel 2 diskutiert kurz die Tendenz der Politik, Haushaltsdefizite in Kauf zu nehmen, präsentiert die Gründe, Fiskalregeln einzuführen, und beschreibt Trends in der Verbreitung von Fiskalregeln. Kapitel 3 diskutiert die empirischen Untersuchungen. Kapitel 4 beinhaltet abschliessende Bemerkungen.

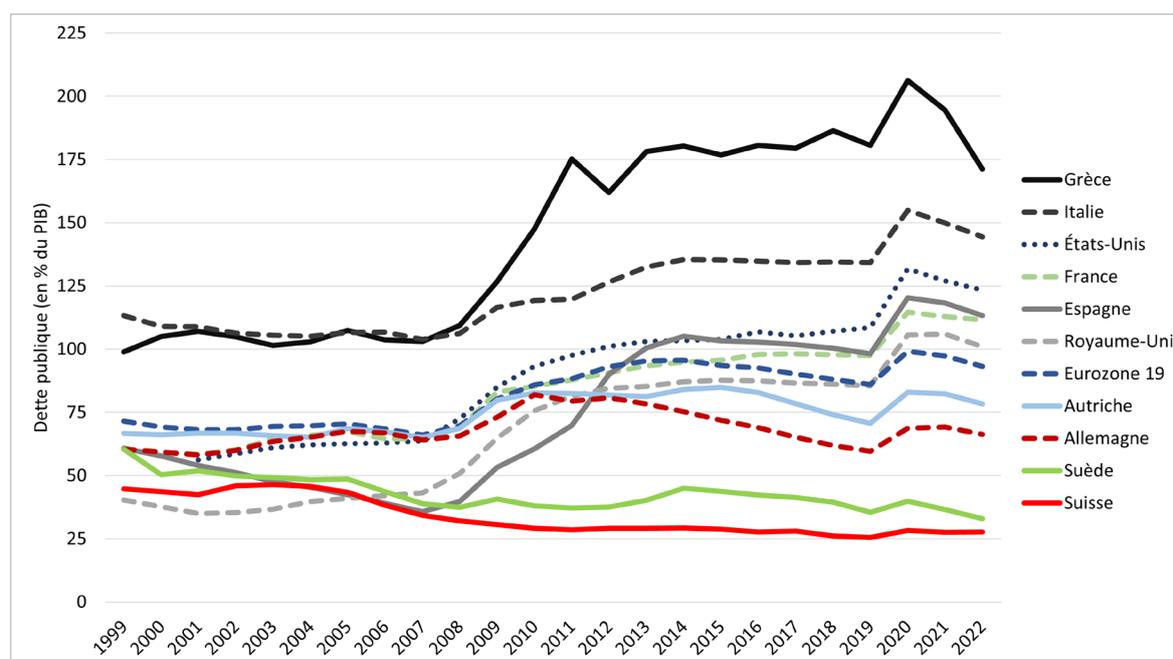
Appendix C: Introduction in French

La pandémie de COVID-19 a durement affecté les économies à travers le monde. Pour atténuer les effets économiques de cette crise, les gouvernements ont adopté des trains de mesures économiques d'une ampleur souvent inégalée, avec pour résultat que la dette des pays s'est considérablement creusée. L'on sait toutefois pertinemment que la dynamique et le niveau de la dette publique varient d'un État à l'autre (cf. figure 1).

Les règles budgétaires jouent un rôle majeur dans la conduite d'une politique budgétaire saine et durable et, donc, dans la résilience des finances publiques. De fait, elles sont considérées comme le principal instrument institutionnel propre à garantir la réalisation de ces objectifs. En particulier, elles sont supposées discipliner le comportement des responsables politiques en matière de dépenses publiques, susciter la confiance des agents économiques et fournir une marge de manœuvre budgétaire pour amortir les futurs chocs économiques.

Les États ont cependant modifié leur cadre budgétaire en réponse à la pandémie de COVID-19, notamment en activant des clauses de sauvegarde ou en suspendant provisoirement les règles budgétaires (cf. p. ex. Davoodi et al., 2022a). À mesure que la pression et les risques budgétaires s'accroissent, les cadres budgétaires font l'objet d'une attention accrue, car les États doivent concilier leurs efforts de relance économique avec la dette publique élevée. Dans le même temps, ils doivent continuer de relever des défis structurels en matière de dépenses, découlant du vieillissement de la population, du système de santé, de la défense nationale ainsi que de la transition énergétique et climatique. En d'autres termes, les crises et les pressions structurelles mettent à l'épreuve la résilience des cadres budgétaires.

Figure 1: Dette publique de certains États de l'OCDE, de 1999 à 2022

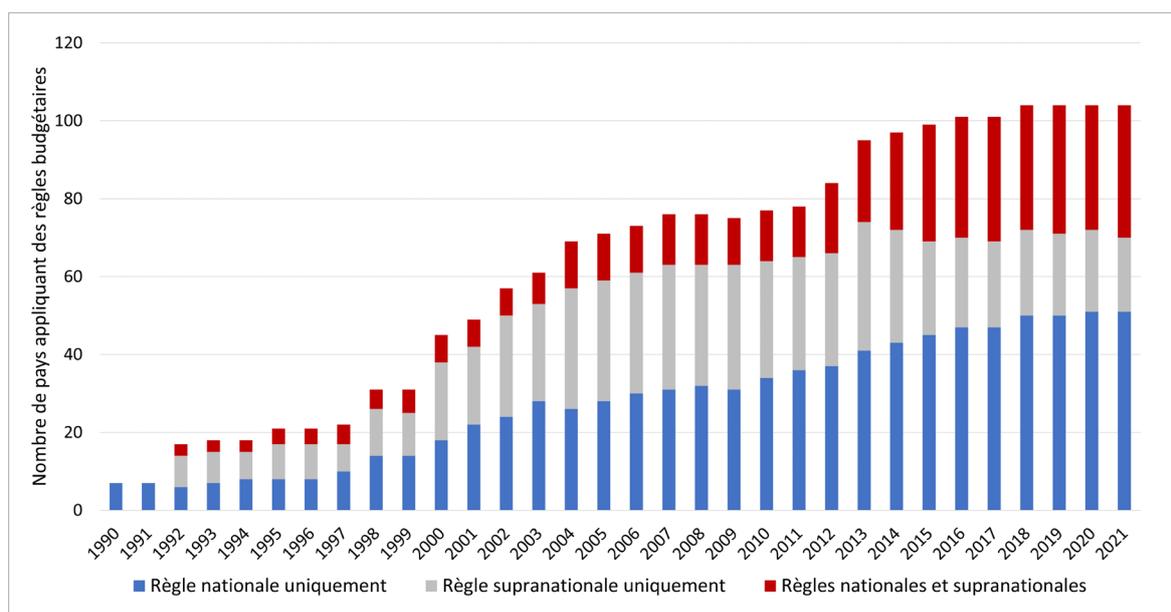


Source: OCDE

Le débat qui se tient actuellement sur la réforme du cadre budgétaire de l'Union européenne (UE), défini il y a près de 25 ans, et sur son rétablissement après l'activation d'une clause générale de sauvegarde en 2020 illustre parfaitement la situation. Au niveau national, un exemple concret de règles budgétaires est le frein à l'endettement mis en place en Suisse il y a 20 ans. Il convient de noter que cette règle a bénéficié d'un large soutien lors de la votation populaire sur la modification correspondante de la Constitution. Elle a également servi de modèle au frein à l'endettement en Allemagne et au renforcement du cadre budgétaire de l'UE après la crise financière mondiale.

Ces dernières décennies, un nombre croissant d'États (on en dénombrait plus de 100 en 2021) ont instauré une politique budgétaire fondée sur des règles (cf. figure 2). Même si le type et le nombre de règles budgétaires appliquées varient d'un pays à l'autre, le cadre englobe souvent une règle en matière de dette, qui s'accompagne fréquemment d'une règle d'équilibre budgétaire ou d'une règle de dépenses. Une évaluation des analyses empiriques sur l'impact des règles budgétaires semble opportune au vu des défis économiques qui se posent et du nombre grandissant de pays ayant l'expérience de la conduite d'une politique budgétaire basée sur ces règles.

Figure 2: Adoption de règles budgétaires depuis 1990



Source: Fiscal Rules Dataset du Fonds monétaire international, de 1985 à 2021; Davoodi et al. (2022b)

Remarques: nombre de pays appliquant au moins une règle budgétaire. Au total, 53 pays sont soumis à des règles supranationales qui souvent complètent les règles budgétaires nationales. Il s'agit des 27 États membres de l'UE, des 6 États membres de l'Union monétaire des Caraïbes orientales (ECCU), des 8 États membres de l'Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine (UEMOA), des 6 États membres de la Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique centrale (CEMAC) et des 6 États membres de la Communauté d'Afrique de l'Est (CAE).

Pour promouvoir l'élaboration de politiques fondées sur des données factuelles, la présente étude analyse dans un premier temps le lien entre les règles budgétaires et la performance budgétaire, laquelle se mesure principalement par les variations du solde budgétaire, des recettes ou dépenses publiques et de la dette publique. Cette étude inclut des analyses portant sur d'autres aspects de cette performance tels que l'impact des règles budgétaires sur la précision des prévisions correspondantes, la notation des emprunts d'État, l'investissement public et la procyclicité des politiques

budgétaires. Par ailleurs, elle présente des articles récents qui creusent au-delà de la performance budgétaire, en mettant en relation les règles budgétaires avec des aspects plus larges d'ordre politique. On ne trouve pour l'heure pas dans la littérature d'étude détaillée sur les différents aspects de l'impact des règles budgétaires. Des analyses antérieures ou plus spécifiques ont été présentées par Feld et Reuter (2017), par Burret et Feld (2014), qui mettent l'accent sur le niveau infranational aux États-Unis et en Suisse, et, en ce qui concerne les règles budgétaires et l'investissement public, par Blesse et al. (2023).

La présente revue de la littérature se base sur des publications scientifiques et sur les récents travaux de grandes organisations internationales. Elle se fonde surtout sur des analyses empiriques des règles budgétaires appliquées au niveau national, principalement dans les économies des pays de l'OCDE et de l'UE. Concernant les États membres de l'UE, cela coïncide avec les données sur le cadre budgétaire de l'UE. La revue de la littérature se réfère parfois à des faits observés au niveau infranational, par exemple dans les cantons suisses, qui ont une longue tradition des règles budgétaires et de l'autonomie décentralisée. Destinée à informer les choix de politique, l'analyse livre un examen non technique des principaux résultats des études passées en revue, en faisant référence aux données sous-jacentes et aux méthodes empiriques et leurs limites.

Il ressort de cette analyse que la littérature empirique relative aux règles budgétaires s'est diversifiée et porte aujourd'hui sur différents aspects de l'efficacité. Cette littérature a beaucoup gagné en qualité pour ce qui est de souligner le rôle des règles budgétaires dans la performance budgétaire.

Premièrement, il a été démontré dans une mesure relativement large que ces règles ont pour corollaire une meilleure performance budgétaire, estimée selon les soldes budgétaires, les recettes et les dépenses publiques, la volatilité de ces dernières et la dette publique (cf. p. ex. Fall et al., 2015; Badinger et Reuter, 2017; Caselli et Reynaud, 2020). Des contributions empiriques récentes opèrent une différenciation encore plus poussée de l'effet des règles budgétaires en les distinguant selon leur type et leur conception. Deuxièmement, il est établi que ces règles se traduisent par des prévisions plus précises, qui sont essentielles à la planification et à la crédibilité budgétaires (cf. p. ex. Luechinger et Schaltegger, 2013; Picchio et Santolini, 2020). D'autres données soulignent l'impact positif des règles budgétaires sur la notation des emprunts d'État, laquelle est indispensable pour les marchés financiers. En particulier, les règles budgétaires strictes semblent produire un effet, notamment lorsque les marchés financiers sont marqués par l'incertitude (cf. p. ex. Feld et al., 2017; Thornton et Vasilakis, 2017; Afonso et Jalles, 2019). D'autres données encore, provenant de la recherche empirique, suggèrent que les règles budgétaires n'ont pas pour conséquence première d'entraver l'investissement public. Celui-ci peut néanmoins être menacé lorsque les règles sont excessivement rigides, notamment pendant les périodes d'assainissement budgétaire (cf. p. ex. Delgado-Téllez et al., 2021; Ardanaz et al., 2021; Vinturis, 2022). De plus, les travaux empiriques concluent que les règles budgétaires n'accroissent pas la procyclicité de la politique budgétaire. Selon des données issues de vastes échantillons de pays, la conception des règles budgétaires est importante, et leurs effets dépendent du contexte économique et institutionnel (cf. p. ex. Combes et al., 2017; Guerguil et al., 2017; Reuter et al., 2022).

Si l'on considère également d'autres éléments des cadres budgétaires, on constate qu'un nombre croissant de travaux de recherche examinent le rôle des institutions budgétaires indépendantes (IBI), qui sont jugées complémentaires aux règles budgétaires. De fait, des études empiriques

montrent que des IBI bien conçues permettent d'affermir ces règles et contribuent à améliorer les soldes budgétaires et à réduire la procyclicité. On observe en particulier que les prévisions sont plus précises et les règles budgétaires mieux respectées dans les pays où les IBI évaluent les premières et surveillent l'application des secondes (cf. p. ex. Debrun et Kinda, 2017; Beetsma et al., 2019; Chrysanthakopoulos et Tagkalakis, 2022).

Compte tenu de l'expérience acquise dans le cadre des assainissements budgétaires qui ont suivi la crise financière mondiale, les conséquences potentiellement néfastes des règles budgétaires en matière d'inégalité (Hartwig et Sturm, 2019), de polarisation politique (Aaskoven, 2020) et de sélection des responsables politiques (Gamalerio et Trombetta, 2023) font depuis peu l'objet de travaux de recherche. Ces études n'en sont toutefois qu'à leurs premiers pas.

Selon la littérature empirique, les règles budgétaires fonctionnent comme un mécanisme d'engagement et stimulent la performance budgétaire. Les avis sont cependant partagés quant à leur lien de cause à effet avec le resserrement des politiques budgétaires. Du point de vue méthodologique, une relation favorable entre les règles budgétaires et la performance budgétaire n'implique pas nécessairement un lien de causalité. Elle peut tout simplement indiquer que les gouvernements qui ont davantage le souci d'une politique budgétaire saine et de la viabilité budgétaire sont également plus enclins à mettre en place et à appliquer de telles règles. Elle peut aussi signifier que les gouvernements sont davantage susceptibles de mettre en œuvre des règles qu'ils jugent réalisables, comme lorsque l'on s'attend à un redressement naturel de l'économie et des comptes publics après une crise.

Dans ce contexte, Heinemann et al. (2018) proposent une première méta-analyse de régression qui couvre 30 études sur le lien entre les règles budgétaires et la performance budgétaire. Il ressort des résultats obtenus que celles-ci auraient un effet limitatif sur les finances publiques. Ces résultats comportent toutefois un défaut, car l'analyse présente un biais par excès lorsque les problèmes d'endogénéité ne sont pas pris en compte. En d'autres termes, les résultats empiriques tendent à surestimer l'impact des règles budgétaires. Un problème analogue se pose lorsque l'on étudie l'interaction entre ces règles et les IBI ainsi que le contexte institutionnel. Afin d'atténuer ce problème, des études empiriques récentes sur les règles budgétaires appliquent des méthodes empiriques de pointe pour identifier la causalité, y compris les méthodes « difference-in-differences », « instrumental variables », « quasi-natural experiments » et « propensity scores-matching ».

Quels types de règles budgétaires sont les plus efficaces et dans quels contextes institutionnels ? Voilà la question essentielle. Asatryan et al. (2018) soulignent l'importance d'inscrire ces règles dans la constitution pour accroître la crédibilité et améliorer dès lors la performance budgétaire. Pour ce qui est du type de règles budgétaires, les règles relatives à l'équilibre budgétaire et aux dépenses semblent être les plus efficaces selon les données empiriques. En ce qui concerne la conception des règles budgétaires, la recherche suggère que celles qui sont bien conçues permettent d'améliorer la performance budgétaire, d'éviter un recul de l'investissement public et de réduire la procyclicité des politiques budgétaires. Les principales caractéristiques conceptuelles englobent une base légale solide, une obligation d'application et des dispositions souples qui tiennent compte du cycle conjoncturel. Par ailleurs, des travaux prometteurs sont menés sur l'interaction entre les règles budgétaires et le contexte institutionnel plus large. Ceux-ci suggèrent notamment que ces règles et l'efficacité gouvernementale se complètent sur le plan institutionnel

(Bergman et Hutchison, 2015) pour diminuer la procyclicité et, au-delà d'un certain seuil de qualité institutionnelle, se substituent l'une à l'autre pour garantir la viabilité budgétaire (Bergman et al., 2016). Dans le même ordre d'idées, un niveau minimum de transparence budgétaire est nécessaire pour que les règles soient efficaces, selon Gootjes et de Haan (2022b). Plus ou moins sur le même sujet, des travaux de recherche novateurs examinent les déterminants du respect des règles budgétaires et mettent en évidence l'importance des facteurs politiques et économiques (cf. p. ex. Reuter, 2019; Larch et al., 2023).

La présente analyse a vocation à éclairer la réflexion sur les moyens de rendre les finances publiques plus résilientes au lendemain de la pandémie de COVID-19 et de la crise énergétique. Cette préoccupation trouve son expression flagrante notamment dans le débat actuel sur la réforme du cadre budgétaire de l'UE. Cette discussion montre à quel point il est important de : (i) réduire la complexité des règles budgétaires tout en conservant leur flexibilité; et (ii) renforcer la perspective à moyen et long terme de la politique budgétaire (p.ex. Commission européenne, 2021, Cuerdo et al., 2022). L'analyse de la littérature vise aussi à éclairer la réflexion de manière plus générale : elle montre qu'il y a de bonnes raisons de ne pas modifier des règles budgétaires bien conçues même si l'on pense que l'action politique devrait couvrir davantage de domaines, y compris lorsque des voix s'élèvent pour augmenter les dépenses publiques. Enfin, les crises récentes ont certes mis à l'épreuve la résilience des cadres budgétaires, mais elles ont également fourni des arguments supplémentaires en faveur des règles budgétaires : le respect de celles-ci et, partant, une dette publique plus faible sont bénéfiques pour les États, qui disposent alors d'une marge de manœuvre budgétaire et peuvent répondre de manière adéquate à des crises majeures.

Le présent document est structuré comme suit : le chapitre 2 établit brièvement le contexte en mettant en évidence la tentation du déficit, les motifs plaidant pour des règles budgétaires et les tendances en la matière. Le chapitre 3 expose les résultats empiriques, et le chapitre 4, les conclusions.