

**Independence and Accountability via Inflation Targeting:
Strengthening the Foundations for Successful Monetary Policymaking**

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Introduction

Successful institutional arrangements for monetary policymaking must resolve the tension that can arise between central bank independence and accountability. Because monetary policy actions that yield short-run benefits often impose even larger long-run costs, outcomes that are preferable to everyone can be achieved by insulating the central bank from day-to-day economic and political pressures. At the same time, however, an independent central bank's objectives should stay aligned with those of society at large.

A streamlined mandate from Congress, instructing the Federal Reserve to focus on stabilizing inflation around its self-declared two percent target, would provide the strongest foundations for effective monetary policymaking by satisfying both these requirements. An inflation-targeting mandate would help preserve, *de jure*, the increased independence won by the Federal Reserve, *de facto*, only after the United States economy suffered through high inflation and high unemployment during the 1970s. The same inflation-targeting mandate would make the Fed more accountable, by specifying a quantitative goal for monetary policy against which the central bank can and should be judged.

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Securing Independence

Article I, Section 8 of the United States Constitution gives to Congress the power to “coin money” and “regulate the value thereof.” Modern economic theory provides a rationale for this.

In general equilibrium, utility maximizing households and profit maximizing firms care only about relative prices. Thus, market-clearing conditions for goods and services work only to pin down those relative prices. An actor from outside the system is needed to solve the coordination problem that determines the aggregate price level. Consistent with its Constitutional powers, Congress gives the Federal Reserve monopoly rights over the issuance of base money: currency plus bank reserves. By exercising its monopoly control over the monetary base, the Federal Reserve regulates on behalf of Congress the value of money or, equivalently, its reciprocal: the nominal price level itself. Congress retains the right to set the Fed’s mandate, specifying the goals it wishes monetary policy to achieve. In this way, Congress ensures that the Fed remains accountable to the American people.

Congress has also put in place a number of institutional features – including 14-year terms for Federal Reserve Board Governors and a decentralized structure consisting of the 12 Federal Reserve Banks in addition to the Board itself – that potentially allow Fed officials to take a longer-run view. Much of post-World War II monetary history, however, suggests that these features, by themselves, have been insufficiently strong. This history points to a lack of independence, rather than an absence of accountability, as the bigger practical obstacle to effective monetary policymaking.

The historical problem is illustrated best by an example presented by Finn Kydland and Edward Prescott (1977) in their article, “Rules Rather than Discretion: The Inconsistency of

Optimal Plans.” This paper formed an important part of the work for which the two economists were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2004.

In Kydland and Prescott’s example, a central banker operating under discretion – making optimal choices period-by-period based on prevailing economic conditions – is always tempted to generate surprise inflation to lower the rate of unemployment. Agents in the private sector, however, correctly anticipate that the central bank will succumb to this temptation, and rationally build their expectations of inflation into price and wage-setting decisions. In equilibrium under discretion, therefore, inflation is suboptimally high, but unemployment is no lower than it would otherwise be.

If, on the other hand, the central banker in Kydland and Prescott’s example is insulated from short-run political pressures, and thereby allowed to adopt and adhere to an intermediate-term policy rule that is fixed independently of current economic conditions, he or she will successfully eschew the temptation to exploit the expectational Phillips curve, and aim to keep inflation low instead. Quite strikingly, by striving to do less, the central bank accomplishes more: it succeeds, at least, in creating and maintaining an environment of stable prices, leaving unemployment to fluctuate, as it would anyway, in response to ever-evolving conditions in the labor markets.

Kydland and Prescott’s model is not just an intellectual curiosity, for it successfully explains why, despite the appearance of a statistical Phillips curve relationship between inflation and unemployment in the United States data, the Federal Reserve’s efforts to exploit that Phillips curve led, during the 1970s, not to lower unemployment at the cost of higher inflation but instead to the worst of both worlds: higher unemployment and higher inflation. In fact, Robert Barro and David Gordon (1983) later used essentially the same model as the foundations for what they

called “A Positive Theory of Monetary Policy,” meaning a theory that accounts for the historical facts.

Also quite strikingly, both the discretionary and the committed central bankers in the Kydland-Prescott model share the same preferences as society as a whole. The model’s success at explaining the stagflationary experience of the 1970s, therefore, points not to a lack of accountability but instead to a lack of independence as the main flaw in the design of monetary policymaking arrangements during those years. Indeed, a major theme running through the second volume of Allan Meltzer’s authoritative *History of the Federal Reserve* is how Federal Reserve Chairs Martin and Burns were consistently pressured by Presidents Johnson and Nixon to adopt and maintain policies that were systematically too accommodative, fueling inflation’s rise. Meltzer (2009a, p.676) quotes Burns himself on this point:

Viewed in the abstract, the Federal Reserve System had the power to abort the inflation at its incipient stage fifteen years ago [1964] or at any later point, and it has the power to end it today [1979]. At any time within that period, it could have restricted the money supply ... to terminate inflation with little delay. It did not do so because the Federal Reserve was itself caught up in the philosophical and political currents that were transforming American life and culture.

Finally recognizing that high inflation had become a major economic and political problem. President Carter appointed Paul Volcker, known for his willingness to pursue anti-inflationary policies, as Federal Reserve Chair in August 1979, after William Miller’s brief term as Burns’ initial successor. Even then, however, Congressional and Presidential pressures on the Federal Reserve continued, as Meltzer (2009b, pp.1049-1050) explains:

Prodded by the congressional Democrats, labor unions, and others, on March 14 [1980], the president [Carter] addressed the public on television ... and he told the Federal Reserve to impose credit controls on borrowing. ... The Federal Reserve

opposed but did not resist. ... The Board's vote was five to one to adopt controls. Most of the members disliked the proposal, but only Henry Wallich voted no.

Only after credit controls failed politically, and were finally lifted in June 1982, was the Volcker Fed left free to fight inflation using the only method that has ever been proven to work: by reducing the growth rate of money. Meltzer (2009*b*, p.1128) concludes:

The anti-inflation program became possible because President Reagan and, with the exception of credit controls, President Carter, did not interfere. Leading members of Congress supported the policy, and those affected most – the homebuilders – reluctantly accepted the importance of reducing inflation.

Subsequent Presidents and members of Congress generally followed suit, and refrained from commenting on or criticizing specific policy actions taken by the Greenspan Fed. The fact that low inflation during the Greenspan years was accompanied by low unemployment speaks, once again, to the usefulness of the Kydland-Prescott model and, more generally, to the important role played by central bank independence. By focusing first on keeping inflation low, a more independent Fed also creates an environment of monetary stability within which the free market works best to create opportunities for all Americans. In contrast to graphs that struggle to show the statistical Phillips curve, the two panels of figure 1 reveal much more easily the choices that are available to designers of monetary policy making institutions. Inflation can be low or high; it can be stable or volatile. Unemployment fluctuates no matter what, but perhaps remains lower and more stable when the central bank stabilizes inflation first.

Establishing Accountability

Very much to its credit, the Federal Reserve, especially under Greenspan's successors, Bernanke, Yellen, and Powell, has taken a series of important steps to make the monetary policymaking process more transparent. These actions, summarized by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's "Timeline to Transparency," help ensure that the central bank, despite its enhanced independence, remains accountable to Congress and, by extension, the American public.

Starting in 2000, the Committee began releasing after each of its meetings a policy statement, explaining the rationale for its policy actions and providing a brief assessment of its outlook for the balance of risks going forward. Since 2007, the Summary of Economic Projections has added even more detail, by collecting numerical forecasts for inflation, unemployment, and output growth as well as intermediate and longer-term projections for the federal funds rate target made by each Governor and Reserve Bank President. Press conferences led by the Chair have been held after every other FOMC meeting since 2011; beginning in 2019, these press conferences will follow every meeting.

Most important of all, however, in 2012, the FOMC began releasing an annual Statement on Longer-Run Goals and Monetary Policy Strategy. With it, the Fed accepted direct responsibility for controlling inflation in the long run. The most recent statement, renewed in 2018, indicates specifically that:

The inflation rate over the longer run is primarily determined by monetary policy, and hence the Committee has the ability to specify a longer-run goal for inflation. The Committee reaffirms its judgment that inflation at the rate of 2 percent, as measured by the annual change in the price index for personal consumption expenditures, is most consistent over the longer run with the Federal Reserve's statutory mandate.

The FOMC could not be clearer on how it wishes to be held accountable. So long as the preferred measure of inflation, based on year-over-year changes in the PCE price index, remains close to the two-percent target, the Fed should be congratulated for doing its job well. But if inflation deviates persistently in either direction from the two-percent target, members of Congress should ask Federal Reserve officials to explain why.

The FOMC's Statement also explicitly recognizes that, as suggested by the Kydland-Prescott model and as confirmed by the data shown in figure 1, unemployment, though it may be influenced by monetary policy in the short run, lies well beyond the Fed's ability to control over longer horizons:

The maximum level of employment is largely determined by nonmonetary factors that affect the structure and dynamics of the labor market. These factors may change over time and may not be directly measurable. Consequently, it would not be appropriate to specify a fixed goal for employment

Thus, despite its current statutory dual mandate, prescribed by the Federal Reserve Reform Act of 1977, to pursue both "stable prices" and "maximum employment," that Fed acknowledges that it cannot take credit or accept blame for fluctuations in the rate of unemployment as it surely can in the case of inflation. Congress should stop pretending that it can do so.

Finally, the FOMC's Statement emphasizes, again as suggested by the Kydland-Prescott model and as confirmed by the data, that any continued appearance of a statistical Phillips curve relationship between inflation and unemployment in the data does not translate into a trade-off between those two variables that can be exploited systematically by monetary policy. To the contrary, the best way the Fed can promote low unemployment is to aim for stable inflation first:

In setting monetary policy, the Committee seeks to mitigate deviations of inflation from its longer-run goal and deviations of employment from the Committee's assessments of its maximum level. These objectives are generally complementary.

Constrained in its language by the statutory dual mandate, this is about as close as the FOMC can get to asking Congress for a more streamlined, and sensible, single mandate to target inflation.

Conclusion

Since 1980, the Federal Reserve has made good use of its enhanced independence by keeping inflation in the United States low and stable. Under Chairs Volcker, Greenspan, Bernanke, Yellen, and Powell, the Fed has also unilaterally adopted practices and procedures that have made its policy actions easier to anticipate, understand, and evaluate.

The focus should now shift back to Congress, to finally dismiss its discredited dreams of an exploitable Phillips curve, left over from the late 1960s and 1970s, and to respect, instead, the lessons learned from economic theory and history since then. A streamlined statutory mandate that accepts the Fed's self-imposed two percent inflation target as the principal goal for monetary policy would both secure the central bank's independence and bolster its accountability.

The current dual mandate, by contrast, benefits Congress and the President, and only to the extent that they unfairly fault the Fed, for their own political gain, for paying insufficient attention to unemployment. Backsliding to the ways of the 1970s, by pressuring Federal Reserve officials to exploit an illusory Phillips curve will lead again, as it did before, to both higher inflation and higher unemployment. By contrast, a Congressional commitment that leaves the Fed free to pursue price stability first will not only guarantee that the era of low inflation enjoyed

since the 1980s will continue, but will also help recreate the backdrop of monetary stability that allowed the private economy, throughout the 1990s, to create robust growth in incomes and jobs.

Moreover, by accepting the Fed's two percent inflation target as its own, Congress would establish a benchmark against which the Fed can be safely and fairly judged. Figure 2 reveals that, throughout most of the period since 2009, the Fed's preferred measure of inflation has run persistently below that two percent target. Suboptimally low inflation extending over a horizon almost as long as a decade must surely reflect, in part, monetary policy that is insufficiently accommodative. How is it that, despite seven years of interest rates near zero and three rounds of quantitative easing, the Fed still failed to deliver needed monetary stimulus to the economy during and after the financial crisis and recession that followed? This is the kind of question that debate and discussion, built around a single mandate, can help us answer. Inflation targeting, the key to success in the past, remains the key to success in the future.

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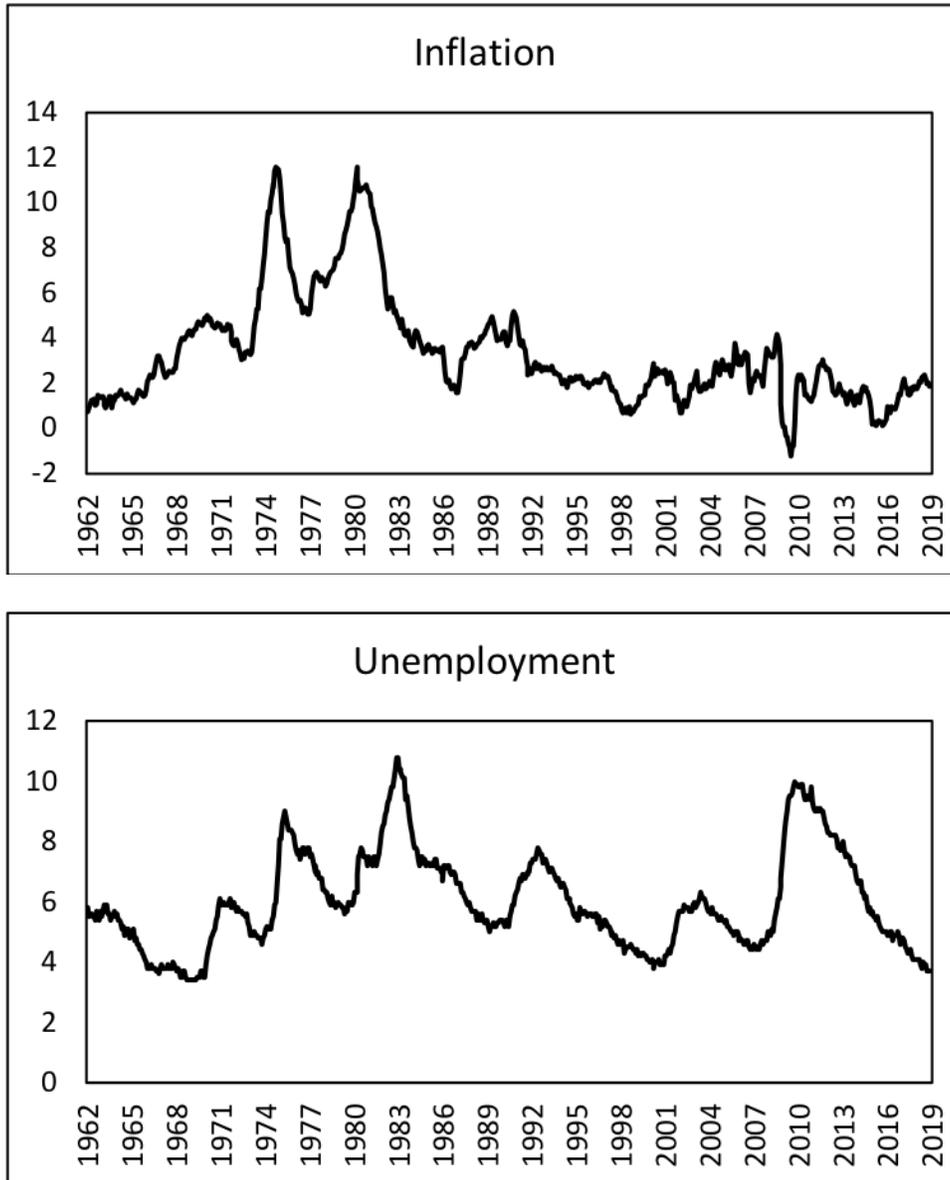


Figure 1. Inflation and Unemployment in the United States. The top panel plots year-over-year percentage changes in the price index for personal consumption expenditures; the bottom panel plots the civilian unemployment rate. Both series are drawn from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis' FRED database.

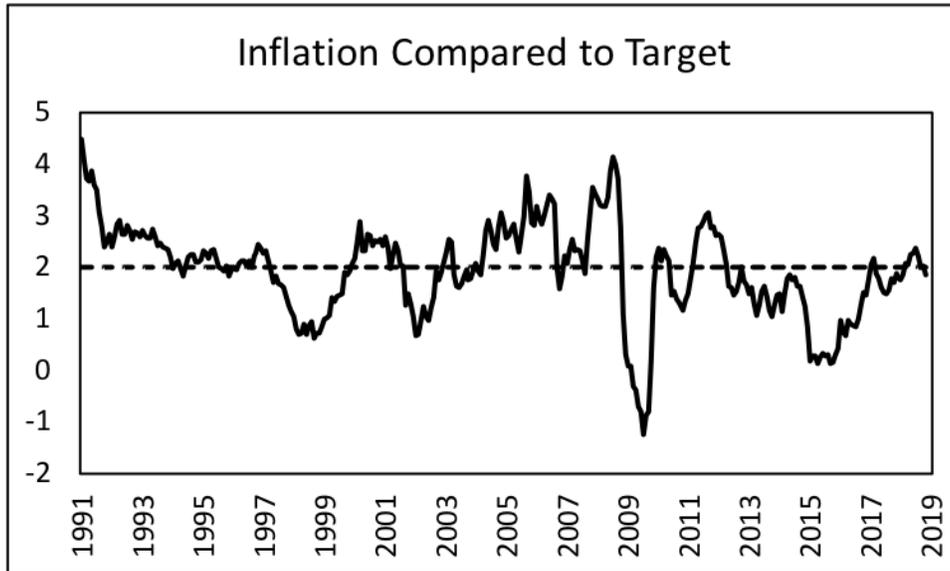


Figure 2. Inflation and the Federal Reserve’s Target. The solid line shows the behavior of the actual US inflation rate, as measured by year-over-year percentage changes in the price index for personal consumption expenditures. The dashed line marks the two-percent target identified in the Federal Open Market Committee’s “Statement on Longer-Run Goals and Monetary Policy Strategy.” Inflation data are from the FRED database.