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Measuring firms' financial constraints: A rough guide

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Measuring firms' financial constraints: A rough guide

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Abstract

The recent years have been prolific in terms of development of new measures of firms' financial constraints. This paper surveys the main strategies proposed. Additionally, we discuss the key advantages and disadvantages of each measure as well as the data requirements for implementation. Finally, it provides a useful tool for researchers that intend to analyse the impact of constraints on firm behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Firms' access to finance has been an increasingly relevant topic for researchers and policymakers (e.g. OECD, 2012). However, empirically addressing this issue can prove to be a difficult task. In this survey, we summarize the existing approaches and methodologies to measure financial constraints. It is organised in a way that facilitates the comparison of the different methodologies, taking into account the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. This allows the researcher to adequate the most appropriate technique for a research purpose and available data.

Financial constraints are empirically not observable. In fact, there is no item on the balance sheet that tells us if, and the extent to which, a firm is financially constrained. As a result, researchers have strived to develop methodologies that consistently allow identifying and measuring such constraints.

There are, however, a number of specificities associated with financial constraints that one should expect to be reflected in a good measure of financial constraints. Firstly, financial constraints are firm-specific. Even though interest lies in making inferences regarding a certain firm characteristic (e.g. firm size or age) or firm behaviour (e.g. innovation activity), one should expect highly heterogeneous levels of access to external finance. Additionally, constraints are time-varying, since a firm may move from constrained to unconstrained states (or across different degrees of constraint) as, for example, it establishes stronger investor-lender relationships and gains better visibility. The reverse may also be true if, for example, a firm's previously sound economic and financial conditions start to deteriorate (eventually defaulting on previous loans), investment opportunities change or idiosyncratic shocks occur. In this case, it might happen that this previously unconstrained firm will now find it difficult to obtain external finance. Therefore, one might expect different states of constraints along the timeline (e.g. Hubbard, 1998; Cleary, 1999). Finally, financial constraints is not a clear-cut phenomena where a firm is either financially constrained or not, but there are different degrees of constraint (Musso and Schiavo, 2008). As a result, each firm, for a given period of time, may move along a spectrum of constraints.

These characteristics signify that, beyond eventual theoretical issues, finding an appropriate measure of financial constraints may prove to be a rather difficult task. Optimally, the perfect measure of financial constraints should be objective, firm-

specific, continuous and, time varying. Unfortunately, to our knowledge, there is no such measure. Nevertheless, we will present and discuss the main advantages and disadvantages of existing approaches to measure constraints.

2. Indirect measures

2.1. Prologue: Primordial tests and the Q-theory of investment

Within the traditional Q model for investment (see Chirinko, 1993 for an overview), one should expect that Tobin's Q summarizes all future information that is relevant for a firm when deciding to invest.¹ Consequently, marginal Q should be the only predictor for investment (Chirinko, 1993). Therefore, we should not expect that additional variables (particularly financial ones) have a significant explanatory power in Q investment regressions. However, while financial variables such as cash-flow, have been shown to be relevant in firms' investment decisions, the contribution of Q was found to be disappointingly low (e.g. Blundell et al., 1992). This type of result has driven researchers to argue that (after controlling for Q) investment may not be independent from financial decisions due to the presence of financial markets imperfections. Specifically, the extent to which financial constraints increase the bias of average Q with respect to marginal Q has been given particular attention (see Hayashi, 1982; Gomes, 2001). If this is the case, then one should expect that financial variables, and specifically those that relate to firms' ability to generate funds, will turn out to be significant in an investment regression—see Hubbard (1998) for further discussion on Q-based models.

2.2. Cash-Flow Sensitivities

2.2.1. Investment

Theoretically, financial constraints have been incorporated in several models in the past. However, the empirical assessment of financial constraints can essentially be traced back to the seminal work of Fazzari Hubbard and Petersen (1988)—hereafter FHP—that introduced investment to cash-flow sensitivity (ICFS) as a measure of constraints.

The argument is the following. Financially constrained firms can not obtain external finance—at least the full required amounts, or they do obtain them at

¹ The theory was introduced by Brainard and Tobin (1968) and Tobin (1969).

significantly high costs. Therefore, these firms must rely on their internally generated funds once an investment opportunity arises. Meanwhile, financially unconstrained firms can easily resort to external funds to finance their investments. Accordingly, while constrained firms will exhibit a positive propensity to use cash-flows to finance investment (positive and significant ICFS), no systematic relationship should be found for unconstrained ones.

The approach used consisted in classifying firms *a priori* as constrained and unconstrained, based on their dividend policy. By assuming that constrained firms, in order to finance their investment, “*retain all of the low-cost internal funds they can generate*” and so pay lower dividends, FHP proceed to the estimation of ICFS for each class of firms. They regress investment on cash-flow, estimated Q (investment opportunities) and year and firm dummies, upon a sample consisting of 422 USA firms (1970-84).² Their findings, that low-dividend firms (constrained) exhibit higher ICFS than high-dividend ones (unconstrained), provided evidence that ICFS could be a useful measure of financial constraints.

Since the influential work of FHP, numerous studies focused on the use of ICFS to identify and measure firms' financial constraints—the contributions of Hadlock (1998) for the US, Chapman et al. (1996) for Australia; Guariglia (2008) for the UK; Audretsch, and Elston (2002) for Germany; Kadapakkam et al. (1998) and Bond et al. (2003) for different countries are just examples. Even though this approach is, by far, the most commonly used methodology to assess financial constraints (c.f. Carreira and Silva, 2010), it received severe criticism both at the theoretical and empirical levels. We summarize them into three main critiques that follow.

The first study that definitely challenged FHP's approach was Kaplan and Zingales (1997)—hereafter KZ. They pointed out that, not only certain assumptions made on the curvature of the cost function of external finance may not be verified (e.g. positive third derivatives), but also that the classification scheme used by FHP was flawed. In particular, due to precautionary savings and potentially risky adverse management, the dividend policy is an inaccurate sorting variable.

² As an alternative to the typical Q theory investment regression augmented with cash flow, some researchers also use an accelerator and/or error-correction specifications (e.g. Scellato, 2007; Guariglia, 2008).

The second main critique, concerns problems associated with controlling for investment opportunities (FHP use Q). First, it is impossible to measure marginal Q and thus the empirical approximation, average Q (Hayashi, 1982), entails potential missmeasurements due to the violation of certain assumptions, such as imperfect competition and the relationship between firms' investment and financial decisions in these particular types of models (see Chirinko, 1993, and Hubbard, 1998, for a discussion). Second, Cash-Flow might itself contain information about investment opportunities, particularly for firms that face high uncertainty about their investment projects (usually young and growth firms). In this case, cash flow might indicate the direction to go, by revealing additional information on the projects' quality. As a result, one should expect that part of the ICFS is due to investment opportunities that were not captured by Q . In fact, Altı (2003), in a financially frictionless model, shows that even after Q correction firms still present significant ICFS.

Finally, several authors such as Povel and Raith (2002), Cleary et al. (2007) or Lyandres (2007) found the ICFS relationship to be non-monotonic. They argue that ICFS are U-shaped with respect to constraints due to the risk associated with firm default and the efforts of investors in trying to avoid corresponding liquidation losses—by providing larger amounts to mitigate the risk of default—, for sufficiently low levels of internal funds. In this case, a decrease in internal funds below a certain threshold would imply an increase in investment

Overall, these critiques cast serious doubts on the robustness of ICFS as a measure of financial constraints.

2.2.2. Growth

The approach described in the preceding section, has been extended to firm growth. As a result, a number of researchers have studied financial constraints by estimating the sensitivity of firm growth to cash flow (GCFS). We group these studies into 3 major categories, depending on the variable used to measure firm growth. Namely, we distinguish between employment growth (e.g. Oliveira and Fortunato, 2006), growth of total assets (e.g. Carpenter and Petersen, 2002) and sales growth (e.g. Fagiolo and Luzzi, 2006).

In this line of thought, we should note that some of these authors conclude that financial constraints (proxied by cash-flow) have a negative impact upon firm growth (e.g. Fagiolo and Luzzi, 2006; Oliveira and Fortunado, 2006). This type of conclusion may, however, be too impetuous. Cash-flow *per se* is just a proxy (a better or worst one) for financial constraints (see Section 5.3). Therefore a positive and significant coefficient for cash-flow only tells us that firm growth responds positively to increases in cash-flow. Accordingly, unless we use a real measure of financial constraints as explanatory variable, or observe different sensitivities for different groups of firms (distinguishing their growth levels), there is not much we can say about the impact of constraints on firm growth. On the other hand, several papers (e.g. Serrasqueiro et al., 2010, Sarno, 2008) fail to control for investment opportunities. In this case, interpreting positive and significant sensitivities for a group of firms as evidence of financial constraints is flawed, due to investment opportunities hidden in cash-flows (see Altı, 2003).

2.2.3. *Cash*

Recently, in a different perspective of demand for liquidity, Almeida et al. (2004)—hereafter ACW—suggest that financially constrained firms may alternatively be identified by looking at their cash policy. If a firm is constrained, it has to pass-up present investment opportunities and hoard cash, in order to be able to take advantage of profitable future investment opportunities and hedge against future shocks. The same is not true when it comes to unconstrained firms, since they are able to resort to external finance whenever investment opportunities arise (by definition of financial constraints). Therefore, one should expect a positive and significant association between cash stocks and cash-flow for constrained firms, while no such relationship should be found for unconstrained ones. Finally, the degree to which a certain group of firms is financially constrained should be reflected on the cash to cash-flow sensitivity estimate (CCFS), as in ICFS—the higher the CCFS, the more constrained is such group of firms. ACW test if financially constrained firms exhibit high cash-flow sensitivities, while unconstrained firms do not. Results for four out of five classification schemes for constrained/unconstrained firms confirm their hypothesis. Only for the classification

based on Kaplan and Zingales (1997), do the results differ.³ Examples of this approach can also be found in Han and Qiu (2007) or Baum et al. (2011).

The financial nature of the cash stock variable is a shield against miss-measurements in Q and investment opportunities hidden in cash-flow. The reason being that it is not expected that firms will increase their cash stocks if cash-flow signals a new\better investment opportunity, unless they are financially constrained. However, constrained firms may use cash to reduce debt if hedging needs are low (Acharya et al, 2007). Accordingly, one should nevertheless control for debt issuances and investment opportunities. Additionally, as pointed by Almeida et al. (2011) in a subsequent paper, investment in relatively liquid assets, other than cash, may be used to transfer resources across time.⁴ Therefore, any liquid types of investment should also be taken into consideration.

Finally, a few papers have empirically questioned the validity of this measure. They find that all firms, regardless of the *a-priori* classification as (un)constrained, exhibit positive and significant CCFS (e.g. Pal and Ferrando, 2009). Nevertheless, the sensitivity is found to be higher for firms that are expected to be constrained (Lin, 2007).

2.2.4. Common pitfalls

The above mentioned approaches share a number of drawbacks, mostly associated with the *ex ante* classification of firms, that are worthwhile mentioning. Sample partition into different groups of firms according to a certain segmenting variable that, *ex-ante*, is expected to provide information on the degree to which firms are financially constrained is, in fact, quite problematic.

First, it is questionable that the segmenting variable correctly distinguishes between constrained and unconstrained firms, since a superior proxy is yet to be found (Musso and Schiavo, 2008). Accordingly, some classification schemes may be flawed. The leading example is provided by Kaplan and Zingales's (2000) critique of FHP's use of dividend policy as a segmenting variable. They find that according to FHP (1988; 2000) Microsoft would be classified as financially constrained, even if it "*had net*

³ The classification schemes are based on: payout ratio, asset size, bond rating, commercial paper rating, and KZ index.

⁴ In the original model they assumed that firms transfer resources only through cash.

income of \$3.5 billion, capital expenditures of \$0.5 billion, no investment in inventories, no dividends, and no debt, yet held almost \$9 billion of cash—or eighteen times capital expenditures".⁵

Second, it is also unclear that this proxy for constraints is not itself affected by financial constraints. In this situation, one will end up with an *a-priori* classification scheme based on an endogenous variable with respect to constraints—see for example Bond et al. (2003) for ICFS endogeneity problems and estimation biases.

Third, to categorize firms into different groups using continuous segmenting variables, one has to define cut-off points that are not arbitrary. The reason is that the relationship between the segmenting variable and financial constraints may be non-monotonic. As an example, even if it is generally agreed that larger and older firms are not as financially constrained as smaller and younger ones, some studies have shown that this relationship may in fact be U-shaped (e.g. Hadlock and Pierce, 2010).

Fourth, a firm may move across different states of the segmenting variable. Consequently, it might happen that a firm is also moving across different groups. As an example, if one uses firm size as proxy, it might happen that a small, but fast growing firm, classified as constrained in the present, will be classified as unconstrained in the future just because it grew. This entails significant problems in the assignment of firms into such classes within a dynamic perspective.

Nevertheless, within cash-flow sensitivities (CFS), an alternative to perform a sample partition with respect to a given variable, is to test interaction terms of that variable with cash-flow. These interaction terms will then provide the sign (but not the magnitude) of the relationship between the variable and financial constraints. This slightly different approach also allows to test for non-monotonic relationships by introducing interactions of cash-flow with power values (e.g. square) of the variable in matter. Additionally, it also permits the treatment of such variable as endogenous in the regression. However, one still has to assume that CFS correctly identifies and measures financial constraints.

⁵ Firms in FHP (1988) and FHP (2000) were *a-priori* classified as financially constrained if they did not pay dividends and had high cash balances, respectively.

2.3. Euler Equation test

Based on Q-Theory and within the models for investment with adjustment costs, a strand of literature as attempted to identify financially constrained firms by estimating a reduced form Euler equation (see Whited, 1992).

The underlying Euler equation model describes an optimal path for investment given certain parametric adjustment costs. Accordingly, the marginal costs of investment in the present are set equal to the future's marginal costs of foregone investment. This approach prescribes that under perfect capital markets—i.e. under Modigliani-Miller theorem (1958)—a number of parameter restrictions must be verified (Table 1). Failure to verify such restrictions is interpreted as evidence of financial constraints. Note that these parameters are themselves functions of the model's structural parameters.

This test is then applied to a given subsample of firms. As with cash-flow sensitivity (CFS), researchers classify firms *ex-ante* as financially constrained based on a given variable (proxy) that is believed to clearly distinguish financially constrained from unconstrained firms. Accordingly, after deriving an empirical estimating equation from the underlying Euler equation model, one should be able to reject the parameter restrictions for groups of firms that are financially constrained. Conversely, for groups unconstrained firms, the parameter constraints should be met.⁶ Applications of this methodology can be found, inter alia, in Bond and Meghir (1994) or Love (2003).

The main advantage of this approach over the traditional ICFS is that it avoids measuring Q, that may prove to be substantially difficult and confines the analysis to quoted firms. Additionally, the type of data required to the empirical test can be found in many datasets, as it is mostly based on information available in firms' balance sheets. However, the test is derived upon a large number of assumptions and on highly parametric models (see Coad, 2010 for a critique). Furthermore, the framework is based on parameter tests and does not directly produce a variable that can be used in subsequent estimations (see Section 3.2 for an index based on this approach). Finally, as in CFS approaches, *a-priori* classification schemes may be flawed due to non-monotonic relationships, endogeneity and aggregation issues regarding the proxy used.

⁶ Within these parameters there is usually at least one that relates to the shadow cost of external finance (see Whited, 1992).

2.4. Evolutionary test of selection forces

Recent trends, within Evolutionary theory, question the extent to which GCFS are indicative of the presence of financial constraints, rather than just a reflection of the selection process mechanism. They challenge the core assumptions of rational optimization and optimal size, present in models of Neoclassical inspiration—such as Q theory and Euler equation approaches. The rationale is that a firm's growth will depend positively on its "fitness", or in other terms, on their financial performance relative to others—which explains the positive GCFS found in the literature (see Carreira and Silva, 2010). Therefore, it is natural to expect that the "fittest" firms will grow faster (see Coad, 2007).

Firms have "bounded rationality" (e.g. Simon, 1991), in the sense that they make decisions based on the information they presently have, rather than based on future states. Within this perspective, only highly productive firms are able to identify highly profitable investment opportunities due to an higher knowledge stock, better routines and a set of capabilities (Coad, 2010), that lead to a persistence of profit levels (e.g. Geroski and Jacquemin, 1988; Dosi, 2007). As a result, it is reasonable to expect a high correlation between profitability and investment opportunities—this rationale is in line with the argument that cash-flows contain information on investment opportunities (Alti, 2003).

Another implication of bounded rationality is that it no longer makes sense thinking in terms of "optimal size" or "optimal path of growth". In fact, firms always want to grow. Coad (2010) notes that *"evolutionary firms are thus eternally financially constrained, irrespective of information asymmetries, simply because they would always prefer to be a little bit bigger than they currently are"*. Accordingly, the extent to which one finds a positive impact of a profitability measure (e.g. operating margin) on firm growth (e.g. sales), is only indicative of the workings of the selection mechanism. In other words, there is a correct reallocation of market share to the most productive firms.⁷ If on the contrary, growth does not strongly respond to profitability (operating margin), then the selection mechanism is not selecting "the fitter" firms (e.g. Coad, 2007; Bottazzi et al., 2008).

⁷ Usually sales growth is preferred with respect to investment because it captures firms' intangible capital, knowledge and processes.

However, we should note that the major force behind evolutionary dynamics is firms' ability to innovate (Schumpeter, 1939; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Nelson, 1995), of which one should stress radical innovation—where financial constraints are shown to be particularly severe (Czarnitzki and Hottenrott, 2011). In this perspective, selection forces "unfit" firms to exit, therefore having a "cleansing effect". As a result, if there are external factors that inhibit firms innovation capacity (financial constraints), the selection process may drive out of the market firms that, even though having the right capabilities, did not have sufficient funds to overtake promising innovation projects. The extent to which financial constraints to innovation ultimately lead to the survival of inert big and established firms in detriment of vibrant new and small innovative firms, therefore distorting the selection process, is certainly a question that deserves our attention in the future.⁸

2.5. Considerations on the data required

The type of data required to apply the methodologies described in this section is, essentially, information from firms' balance sheets. Despite the pitfalls of these approaches, it is certainly valuable that most National Statistical Offices are able to provide such information for very large (and representative) samples of firms operating in a certain region or country.⁹

However, for some of these approaches, one might also need information from financial markets (e.g. to compute average Q). In the event that such information is strictly necessary, the corresponding sample will only contain publicly traded firms. This has serious implications on the measurement of financial constraints. In fact, these firms are expected to be less financially constrained than untraded ones (see Carreira and Silva, 2010). First, traded firms can easily issue equity and debt. Second they have more visibility and are eventually more credible at the eyes of other types of investors/lenders. Third, information on these firms is widely available and circulates in a more efficient way (Fama, 1970). This reduces information asymmetries, therefore having a crucial impact upon firms' ability to obtain external funding. This distinction

⁸ Note that several empirical studies find a negative impact of financial constraints on firm survival as well as on innovation (see Carreira and Silva, 2010).

⁹ Even for cross-country comparisons, it is possible, although not easy, to obtain such data from International Organizations (e.g. OECD; World Bank), or to buy this information from specialized data collecting companies.

between traded and non-traded firms is particularly relevant for countries with less developed capital markets such as Portugal.

Overall, we should reinforce that indirect measures have two main problems. The first results from the fact that these measures rely on (sometimes strong) theoretical assumptions needed to construct the underlying models for empirical equations. The second is a practical problem associated with the type of measure that is obtained from the estimations. In fact, none of the measures produces a variable that is firm-specific and time-varying. Conversely they only provide a test, based on regression coefficients (or parameters), for the presence of financial constraints within a group\subsample of firms.

3. Direct measures

As an alternative to measuring financial constraints in an indirect way, when available, a direct measure of financial constraints can prove to be a useful tool that avoids the theoretical and measurement issues described in the preceding section. However, there are specificities associated with this type of measures that one must bear in mind. In this section we refer to two possible ways of directly measuring financial constraints and discuss the implications of using them.

3.1. Company reports

Major firms usually provide a report along with their end-of year financial statement—at least those firms that are traded in stock markets are obliged to do so in most countries. These reports contain rich qualitative information regarding firm's financial position and need for external finance. This information allows researchers to assign each firm a level of financial constraints (e.g. Kaplan and Zingales, 1997; Hadlock and Pierce, 2010).

Here follows an example given by Kaplan and Zingales (1997) of a report of a firm classified as "not financially constrained": *"We ended the year in an exceptionally strong financial condition for a company of our size. During the year we paid off all long-term debt, and our cash and cash-equivalent assets have throughout the year exceeded all current liabilities."*

In practice, researchers gather a sample of firms with available company reports. The first step is to search these statements for keywords and expressions that are symptomatic of the presence of financial constraints (Table 1). Secondly, each firm is assigned a level of financial constraints according to the information reported. Finally, if possible, this qualitative information should be complemented with quantitative information (e.g. financial variables) in order to build a final score of financial constraints—in line with Kaplan and Zingales (1997).

While the major advantage of using this type of approach is the richness of information available for the researcher to sort firms according to their levels of constraints, the major drawback is related to the sample size and representativeness of corresponding samples. If on the one hand company reports provide rich and relatively accurate information, on the other hand it is difficult to obtain such information for a large number of firms. Reports are only made available by a small number of firms. Therefore, inferences to the population regarding financial constraints can not be made due to representativeness problems. Among other reasons, these particular firms are usually publicly traded. Accordingly, such firms will, in principle, not be as financially constrained as the untraded ones (see Carreira and Silva, 2010).

Additionally, analysing company reports entails a significant amount of time and effort. In fact, even if reports were available for the whole population of firms, it would be extremely difficult (or virtually impossible) for the researcher to examine all of them with the necessary level of detail.

Finally, problems associated with managers misreporting may also be relevant in countries where managers may not be held liable for disclosure of false information, or whenever it is not possible to match the information from reports with quantitative data.

3.2. Self-evaluation: Survey data

The recent advances in data collection and availability have spawned a new wave of empirical literature that relies on business surveys to identify and measure firms' financial constraints—e.g. Savignac (2009); Beck et al. (2008).

The alternative to using firm reports as direct information on firms' ability to obtain external funds, is simply to ask firms whether or not they are financially constrained. This can be done either by a single question, directly asking firms about

financial constraints (or access to external finance), or through a combination of a number of different questions. Such questions should regard, among others, the cost of external funds (excessive interest rates), credit denials and the availability of external financing sources. The latter approach requires the construction of a score based on the variables obtained from the different questions, following a given criteria.¹⁰

The main advantage of using this type of data is the fact that firms are the best informed agents with respect to the quality of their investment projects. Therefore one should expect that investment opportunities are already taken into account in firms' responses.¹¹ In addition to directly knowing firms' perception of constraints, unlike reports, one can measure constraints for small and young firms, provided that they are included in the survey's target population.

However, the subjective nature of the self-assessed variables means that potential biases, resulting from individuals' perception, may exist. As an example, we might have respondents that feel that their firm is highly financially constrained, when it actually is much less constrained than another firm reporting a low level of constraints.¹²

Furthermore, it is worthwhile noticing that, due to the non-linear nature of the resulting financial constraints variable, this measure can only be used as a dependent variable, with the appropriate non-linear regression technique. Nevertheless, the non-linear nature of an independent variable can be partially overcome if one previously estimates the corresponding non-linear regression and obtains fitted values of the underlying latent variable—provided that suitable instruments are available and the regression has a good fit. However, in this case we would be working with an index (Section 3.1).

With respect to data availability, although in the past this type of information was rather scarce and with an insufficient level of detail (Claessens and Tzioumis, 2006), we should note that the recent financial crisis has encouraged surveys directly

¹⁰ As a mere example, if we have 3 different questions, each one with 3 distinct degrees of response (3 different ordinal variables with 3 levels), a plausible criteria is to build a score of constraints with 3 levels. Firms that answered the maximum (minimum) degrees in all questions are assigned the level 3 (1). The remaining firms, that have mixed responses, are assigned the level 2.

¹¹ Note that deliberate missreporting should not be an issue since these types of surveys are usually anonymous.

¹² Some studies overcome this problem by using data on the credit requested and effectively granted (e.g. Russo and Rossi, 2001; Angelini and Generale, 2005).

aimed at firms' financial constraints. Examples for the European case are the EUROSTAT's *"Access to Finance"* and the ECB's *"Survey on the access to finance of SMEs in the euro area"*. We therefore expect availability of this type of data to be more frequent and detailed in the near future.

A somewhat different approach (when analysing the bank lending channel) is to ask financial institutions (notoriously banks), rather than firms, the extent to which firm credit was denied and for which reasons—see for example Del Giovane et al., 2010. In this approach, one has the advantage of knowing the reasons for credit denial (controls for lenders perception of risk and project quality). However, there are a number of reasons for which this measure is seldom used. First, it is rather difficult to obtain such data from banks or even specialized institutions (a rare example is the ECB's *"Bank Lending Survey For The Euro Area"*).¹³ Second, if one wants to analyse the relationship of financial constraints with other aspects of firm behaviour, one has to match bank with firm level information. This is virtually impossible due to anonymity legal motives (data disclosure policies). Third, but related to the previous points, even if it possible to obtain bank-firm level data, the extent to which the sample will be representative of the population is rather questionable.¹⁴

These direct measures of constraints all share the advantage of being firm-specific and eventually time-varying—if the reports/surveys are collected periodically. Additionally, in contrast with indirect approaches, it is possible to use this type of measure either as a dependent or explanatory variable. However, the subjective and qualitative nature of these measures often calls for the use of quantitative information. As a result, it is advisable to combine these direct measures with firms' financial data. The resulting measures are often referred to as indexes.

¹³ Note that this is a bank level survey, that does not contain firm-specific information. Therefore, one can only observe the evolution of the credit policies, demand and supply of funds within banks' perspective.

¹⁴ As an example, for this to occur, cooperation with the vast majority of banks with desired levels of regional and industry representativeness (branch representativeness) would be necessary.

4. Indexes

In order to avoid some of the disadvantages of direct and indirect measures of financial constraints, the combination of different types of information and different variables into indexes provides a useful tool in the analysis of firms' constraints. The main motivations for the use of indexes is that they allow a firm-specific treatment of financial constraints, as well as they can be used either as dependent or explanatory variables, due to their continuous nature.¹⁵

4.1. With a qualitative dependent variable

The use of indexes of financial constraints is rather recent. This approach was, to our knowledge, first implemented by Lamont et al. (2001). They build on KZ's identification of constrained firms and scores of constraints (using company reports, see Section 3.1). Using KZ's ordered logit regression of financial constraints scores on relevant financial variables, they construct a firm-specific and time-varying index of constraints (known in the literature as the KZ index).¹⁶

The idea is that, given a qualitative variable of financial constraints, one can estimate the impact of a number of different determinants of constraints. These determinants are usually proxies that are expected to influence firms ability to obtain external finance (see Table 1). Using the appropriate non-linear regression technique, one can estimate coefficients for each of the determinants of financial constraints.¹⁷ Having these coefficients, it is then possible to construct an index that results from a linear combination of the determinants, weighted by the estimated coefficients (Table 1).

Even though the outcome is a continuous, firm-specific and time-varying measure of constraints, there are a number of problems associated with this approach. First, it relies on the availability of a qualitative dependent variable. Therefore, it also carries along all the sampling and subjectivity issues raised in Section 3

¹⁵ Note that the Class Ranking Index (Section 4.2.3) is an exception.

¹⁶ The index is given by $KZ_{it} = -1.002 * CF_{it} + 3.139 * B_{it} - 39.368 * D_{it} - 1.315 * C_{it} + 0.283 * Q_{it}$, where CF is cash-flow over total assets, B is long-term debt over total assets, D is total dividends over total assets, C is liquid assets over total assets and Q is Tobin's q.

¹⁷ The estimation of the coefficient is based on a latent variable specification (since the dependent variable is binary\ordinal). See for example Greene and Hensher (2010) for details.

Second, the index is constructed using a specific sample of firms. Accordingly, it is not reasonable to expect that the index coefficients will remain unchanged if one intends to apply it to a different sample—see Silva and Carreira (2010a) for a discussion of the SA index (Hadlock and Pierce, 2010). Consequently, the index can not be universally used as a measure of constraints.

Third, unless the non-linear regression has a very good fit, the corresponding index will only provide a noisy signal of financial constraints. This bias will be particularly severe if there are a number of unobservable and/or omitted variables in the regression, that strongly determine financial constraints.

4.2. Without a qualitative dependent variable

In order to avoid the problems associated with the availability of qualitative data and sample specificity, a number of researchers have devoted their time to construct indexes of constraints that do not rely on this type of data. We summarize these indexes into the three following categories.

4.2.1. Euler equation index

Building on the Euler equation approach (Section 2.2), Whited and Wu (2006) construct an index of constraints that does not require qualitative information. Instead, they use a structural parameter of Whited's (1992) model—the shadow cost of equity finance—that is set to be a function of observable firm characteristics.

In practice, the strategy comes down to estimate the Euler equation model's resulting empirical equation. In this framework, the shadow cost of finance is set, outside of the model, to be a function of observable "financial health" variables. As a result, they obtain a vector of coefficients, that is then used to build the index (known in the literature as the WW index).¹⁸

Although the data requirements for the construction of this index are not particularly difficult to meet—essentially balance sheet data and financial markets

¹⁸ The index is given by:

$$WW_{it} = -0.091 * CF_{it} + 0.021 * B_{it} - 0.062 * D_{it} - 0.044 * A_{it} - 0.035 * Y_{it} + 0.102 * IY_{it},$$

where CF is cash-flow over total assets, B is long-term debt over total assets, D is an indicator of whether or not a firm pays cash dividends, A is the logarithm of total assets, Y is sales growth and IY is 3-digit industry sales growth.

information—the major concern when using this approach is the fact that the index results from a highly parameterized structural model (as in Section 2.2). Additionally, due to the number of parameters involved in the underlying model, this approach is of far more complex implementation than any other measure discussed here. Finally, as in the preceding Section, we should note that the estimated coefficients (therefore the index) are sample-specific, thus they should not be applied to other economic realities.

4.2.2. *MDA index*

An alternative strategy that neither requires a qualitative dependent variable, nor a structural underlying model was implemented by Cleary (1999). Using multiple discriminant analysis (MDA), one can examine which variables are likely to influence the characterization of a firm as either financially constrained or not—in line with Altman (1968) for the case of bankruptcy.

The procedure takes two steps. First, one should use a segmenting variable that enables the distinction of firms into two (or more) mutually exclusive groups. Second, use MDA to assess the ability of each independent variable (determinants of financial constraints) to distinguish a firm between groups. As a result, one can build the index using the coefficients estimated through MDA. Within the same rationale, one can use the segmenting variable to distinguish two (or more) groups of firms (e.g. financially constrained and non-financially constrained) and then estimate a probit/logit on the determinants of financial constraints. The resulting coefficients will then be used to build the index.¹⁹

The major drawback of this approach is the need to have a superior segmenting variable that correctly discriminate between financially constrained and unconstrained firms. Cleary (1999) assumes that dividend policy serves as such variable because firms reducing dividends are likely to be constrained, whereas a firm will only increase dividends if it knows it can maintain them (financially unconstrained).²⁰ However, if the segmenting variable does not consistently discriminate between constrained and

¹⁹ Note that multiple discriminant analysis is the predecessor of non-linear approaches such as the probit and logit. One can see the Z score as a latent variable of financial constraints, as in Section 4.1.

²⁰ Using this type of segmenting variable usually further requires information from financial markets, which may result in sample biases.

unconstrained firms, the resulting index will be biased. This problem is similar to the choice of a variable for an a-priori firm classification (Section 2).

4.2.3. Class Ranking Index

An alternative to the traditional indexes of constraints, first introduced by Musso and Schiavo (2008), is to rank firms in a certain class (e.g. region or industry) that is believed to be reasonably homogeneous. These rankings are computed upon on a number of variables that are found to have a given relationship to financial constraints (proxies).²¹ Therefore, one can build a score of constraints based on the relative rankings of a given number of variables for a certain firm, within a certain class. The motivation to disaggregate firms into homogeneous classes is to account for specificities that may affect the relationship of the proxies and the genuine level of constraints.

The procedure takes two steps. First, identify a number of variables that can serve as proxies of financial constraints—see Section 5.3. For each of these variables, compute the relative position of each firm to the corresponding class mean. Second, collapse the rankings from all the proxies into a single score of financial constraints. As an example, if a firm is very old and large, has a higher dividend payout ratio, it is considered not to be constrained. If the reverse is true, then such firm is assigned as constrained. Intermediate levels may also be built based on the ranking—quantiles of these variables. Examples of this approach can also be found in Bellone et al. (2010) and Silva (2011).

The first problem arises if we wish to use the score of constraints as a continuous variable. In fact, the score variable is of an ordinal nature. Nothing guarantees that the difference between a firm scoring 1 and 2 is the same as the difference between the levels 2 and 3. As a result, the score of constraints must be analysed as an ordinal variable, which has significant implications in the choice of the estimation procedure.

Secondly, if there are non-linearities in the relationship between the proxy and the effective level of constraints, the final score will misrepresent the level of constraints. As an example, while it is generally agreed that financial constraints are

²¹ Musso and Schiavo (2008) construct their index based on the following variables: size (total assets), profitability, liquidity (current asset over current liabilities), cash flow generating ability (the maximum amount of resources that a firm can devote to self-financing), solvency (own funds over total liabilities), trade credit over total assets, repaying ability (financial debt over cash flow).

lower for larger and older firms, we point that such relationship might rather be non-monotonic (U-shaped). If this is the case, then we will have firms assigned the maximum score, while in fact they face a lower level of constraints.

Finally, we should point that the disaggregation in relatively homogeneous classes of firms might entail considerable difficulties when comparing firms across classes. As an example, if the index is built on relative rankings for each industry, and if the less constrained firms in industry A is more constrained than the most constrained firm in industry B, one can not compare the scores of firms in industries A and B because of different benchmarks.²²

5. Other approaches

5.1. Firm level cash-flow sensitivities

A recent strand of literature, based on the CFS rationale, tries to overcome the problems associated with aggregation, as well as *a priori* classification schemes that CFS approaches usually face. This approach consists in introducing firm-level heterogeneity in the measure of financial constraints, without the necessity to use qualitative data or heavily parameterized underlying models. Within this framework, two different methodologies should be mentioned. On the one hand Hovakimien and Hovakimien (2009), hereafter HH, suggested based on time averages weighted by cash-flow. On the other D'Espallier, Vandemaele and Peeters (2008), hereafter EVP, recommend the estimation of heterogeneous cash-flow slopes of a CFS regression.

The measure introduced by HH compares the time average of investment weighted by cash-flow, against the simple average investment. Accordingly, investment in years when cash-flow is higher receives a higher weight, which means that if a firm invests more (less) in years with higher cash flow, the HH index will turn out positive (negative). The reverse is also true. As a result, this measure is expected to capture the sensitivity of investment with respect to variations of cash-flow. The approach can also be extended to other types of CFS (Section 2.1).

However simple, this methodology fails to control for investment opportunities and other variables affecting investment. As an example, the ICFS test relies on the assumption that, holding investment opportunities constant, investment responds

²² Note that firms operating in some industries are, on average, more constrained than firms in other industries (Silva and Carreira, 2010b).

positively to cash-flow if a firm is financially constrained (no sensitivity should be found for unconstrained firms). Additionally this measure does not explore marginal effects (see D'Espallier et al., 2009 for a critique).

A different perspective, introduced by EVP, is to estimate heterogeneous cash-flow slopes of a CFS regression. Using the same rationale of a CFS regression, one obtains a coefficient vector instead of a scalar. As result, we will have a cash-flow sensitivity for each firm. Accordingly, in contrast with the HH index, this methodology allows to control for a number of other relevant variables affecting the dependent variable (e.g. investment opportunities). However, the estimation of firm-level slopes requires refined estimation techniques that may introduce some complexity in the implementation.²³

Nevertheless, both these methodologies share a couple of shortcomings. Even though they are firm-specific, the extent to which firms move from financially unconstrained to constrained states and *vice-versa* is not captured by these time averages. Additionally, they require that the underlying CFS methodology consistently identifies and measures constraints.

5.2. Credit ratings

Credit ratings are the evaluation given by certain agencies to firms. These ratings are the basis for establishing the cost of external funding of a given credit rated firm—either by private investors in capital markets or by financial institutions.

The main benefits from using credit ratings relate to the fact that they summarize a vast set of firms' characteristics, are firm-specific and vary over time, as well as they represent the opinion of the markets (e.g Bottazzi et al., 2008 for an application). Even though using this measure partially picks the credibility of a given firm in the market for funds, it has three major pitfalls.

First, it relies on the quality of the assessment of credit rating agencies. In other words, one must believe that these agencies correctly screen credible companies.²⁴ Second, these ratings are based on the credibility of a given firm at a certain time

²³ EVP use a Generalized Maximum Entropy estimator after Golan et al. (2006), while D'Espallier and Guariglia (2009) use Bayesian econometrics (c.f. Lancaster, 2004; Koop, 2003).

²⁴ Note that the rating itself results from a multivariate score summarizing firms' characteristics or a collection of information from financial statements and reports.

(mostly relying on past economic and financial information, as well as default events), therefore they may fail to capture the true quality of investment projects to be overtaken in the near future. Third, there are sample representativeness problems. Normally, firms that ask to be rated are usually large, mature and traded—we would expect them to be unconstrained, or at least, less constrained than other firms (see Carreira and Silva, 2010). This problem can be partially addressed if, in the analysis of a larger sample that covers non-rated firms, we classify firms as constrained or not, depending on being rated or not, rather than on the rating itself. Once again, we might incur in significant biases if there exist unconstrained firms that avoid being rated simply because they do not want to depend on such ratings for obtaining external finance. Furthermore, some firms may, at some point, become “too big” or “too important” to be downgraded, even though an objective analysis would suggest so.

This type of rating abovementioned is however different from a closer credit risk assessment that, for example, banks usually do. Such analysis might prove to be more accurate than credit ratings (*strictu-sensu*). However, beyond eventual credibility issues, such information is rarely available to the researcher.

5.3. Proxies

The use of proxies is the simplest and most practical way to measure constraints. By definition, if a given variable is highly correlated with financial constraints, it may prove to be a good proxy. If a superior proxy is available, then it can easily be used as either a dependent or explanatory variable that is firm-specific and time-varying.

The large majority (if not all) of the empirical literature on financial constraints relies on a different variety of proxies either as explanatory or segmenting variables. Examples of commonly used proxies are the following: Cash-flow, Cash stocks, Size, Age, Export, R&D intensity, Leverage, Dividend payout ratio, Group membership and Ownership. (For a survey of the empirical findings regarding the relationship of financial constraints with other variables, see Carreira and Silva, 2010.)

Even though there exist different variables that correlate with financial constraints, a good proxy for financial constraints is rather hard to find (Cleary et al., 2007). Additionally, the use of proxies relies on previously devised relationships between financial constraints and the respective variable. Finally, if these relationships

are non-monotonic, then the corresponding variable will only work as a good proxy for a subset of its space (see Section 2.2.4).

6. Conclusion

The analysis of firms' access to finance has been vulnerable to methodological challenges. This paper overviews the existing frameworks used to identify and measure financial constraints.

It is clear that the researcher has a wide range of different measures, with perhaps complementary advantages and disadvantages. Therefore it is hard to clearly point a superior approach. In fact, we would risk saying that there is no perfect measure of financial constraints. This scenario has serious implications on economic research and certainly on policymaking.

While future research should definitely make an effort to develop better methodologies to assess firms' financial constraints, empirical work on this field should be cautious when providing conclusions and suggesting policy actions.

Finally, policymakers should not take single studies as the sole basis for policy actions and the design of policy instruments—e.g. subsidies, special lines of credit or credit guarantee schemes. Particularly, if such policies require redirecting public funds from other public goals and may sometimes lead to market distortions in the event that funds are not correctly allocated to constrained firms.

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Table I. Methodologies used to assess financial constraints

Measures	Data	Strategy	Typical regression\question used	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example
<i>Indirect</i>						
ICFS (Coefficient)	BS, preferably matched with FM.	Split-sample or interact CF with variable of interest. ICFS provide the magnitude of constraints.	$\left(\frac{I}{K}\right)_{it} = \alpha Q_{it} + \beta \left(\frac{CF}{K}\right)_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$ Alternative specifications, even though following the same ICFS principle, are also used. Examples are the accelerator and error correction models.	Easy to compute\estimate; Availability of data.	Consistency of theory behind empirical test; Is an average over time and firms (endogeneity and aggregation biases); Cannot use as dependent or explanatory variable; Not firm-specific; Not time-varying; Use of segmenting variable and endogeneity of <i>a priori</i> classification scheme.	FHP (1988) Scellato (2007) Guariglia (2008)
GCFS: Employment Sales Assets (Coefficient)	BS, preferably matched with FM.	Split-sample or interact CF with variable of interest. GCFS provide the magnitude of constraints.	$\left(\frac{\Delta G}{G}\right)_{it} = \alpha Q_{it} + \beta \left(\frac{CF}{G}\right)_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$ Where G is the variable whose growth is analysed (e.g. total assets). Some authors drop Q (investment opportunities) and use CF as a proxy for financial constraints. Any sensitivity to CF is then interpreted as evidence of financial constraints. These are often referred to as reduced-form models.	Easy to compute\estimate; Availability of data.	Consistency of theory behind empirical test; Is an average over time and firms (endogeneity and aggregation biases); Cannot use as dependent or explanatory variable; Not firm-specific; Not time-varying; Use of segmenting variable and endogeneity of <i>a priori</i> classification scheme.	Carpenter and Petersen (2002) Oliveira and Fortunato (2006) Fagiolo and Luzzi (2006)
CCFS (Coefficient)	BS, preferably matched with FM.	Split-sample or interact CF with variable of interest. CCFS provide the magnitude of constraints.	$\left(\frac{\Delta CS}{A}\right)_{it} = \beta_1 \left(\frac{CF}{A}\right)_{it} + \beta_2 Q_{it} + \beta_3 \left(\frac{X}{A}\right)_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$ Where X contains controls for firm's size as well as sources, demands and substitutes of cash.	Easy to compute\estimate; Availability of data.	Consistency of theory behind empirical test; Is an average over time and firms (endogeneity and aggregation biases); Cannot use as dependent or explanatory variable; Not firm-specific; Use of segmenting variable and endogeneity of <i>a priori</i> classification scheme.	ACW (2004)

(Continued)

Measures	Data	Strategy	Typical regression\question used	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example
Euler equation test (Parameters)	BS, preferably matched with FM.	Using an Euler equation model: For a given sample\ sub-sample check if parameter restrictions hold.	$\left(\frac{I}{K}\right)_{i,t+1} = \beta_1 \left(\frac{I}{K}\right)_{i,t} + \beta_2 \left(\frac{I}{K}\right)_{i,t}^2 + \beta_3 \left(\frac{C}{K}\right)_{i,t} + \beta_4 \left(\frac{Y}{K}\right)_{i,t} + \beta_5 \left(\frac{B}{K}\right)_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$ Under the null hypothesis of absence of financial constraints, the following parameter restrictions should be met: $\beta_1 > 1$; $\beta_2 < 1$; $\beta_3 < 0$; $\beta_4 = 0$ under perfect competition; > 0 otherwise; $\beta_5 = 0$ under Modigliani-Miller; < 0 otherwise; These parameters are functions of the underlying model's structural parameters. We should note that the specification and corresponding parameter decision depend on the derivation of the specific Euler equation.	Availability of data; Avoids the necessity to estimate Q.	Consistency of theory behind empirical test; Cannot use as dependent or explanatory variable; Complexity; Not firm-specific; Not time-varying; Use of segmenting variable and endogeneity of <i>a priori</i> classification scheme.	Bond and Meghir (1994)
Evolutionary test of selection (Coefficient)	BS	If selection is present, growth should be associated with profitability ("growth of the fitter"). If not, the economy may not be reallocating market shares to the most productive firms.	$\left(\frac{\Delta Y}{Y}\right)_{i,t} = \beta \left(\frac{OM}{Y}\right)_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$	Availability of data.	Does not test financial constraints but rather the selection mechanism; Cannot be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Not firm-specific; Not time-varying;	Coad (2007)

(Continued)

Measures	Data	Strategy	Typical regression\question used	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example
Direct						
Company reports (Ordinal)	Reports	Build a score based on information from qualitative financial reports. Qualitative may be complemented with quantitative information as in KZ (1997).	Search reports for keywords such as: <i>"financing, finance, investing, invest, capital, liquid, liquidity, note, covenant, amend, waive, violate, and credit"</i> (Hadlock and Pierce, 2010) Assign firms a classification of constraints according to reports.	Richness of information; Can be used as dependent variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying;	Requires exhaustive analysis of reports; Small and biased samples; Managers may misreport; Qualitative nature of data.	KZ (1997)
Self-evaluation (Ordinal)	Survey	Directly use the variable from the survey question or build a score from different survey questions regarding financial constraints.	Survey questions such as: <i>Classify the degree to which the lack of external finance hampered your projects.</i> <i>Classify the degree to which high interest rates on external finance hampered your projects.</i> <i>At the current interest rate do you want additional credit?</i> <i>Are you willing to obtain additional credit at higher interest rates?</i> <i>Have you seen credit requests being denied?</i>	Can be used as dependent variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Subjective; Qualitative nature of data; Availability data.	Guiso (1998)
Indexes						
Qualitative index (Continuous)	BS matched with qualitative data (Reports or Survey)	Use qualitative information as dependent variable; Estimate parameters of the index using a non-linear regression of the qualitative variable on FC determinants.	Use a qualitative variable of financial constraints (normally a score\ordinal) and estimate a logit\probit. The underlying latent variable of financial constraints is given by: $FC_i^* = \beta_1 L_i + \beta_2 M_i + \epsilon_{1i}$ Therefore, financial constraints will depend on the variables L and M. The coefficients are then used to build the index of the form: $Index_i = \beta_1 L_i + \beta_2 M_i$	Can be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Availability data; Sample-specific; Non-linear regression must have a good fit.	Lamont et al. (2001)
Euler equation index (Continuous)	BS	Using an Euler equation approach: estimate the impact of observable financial variables on the model parameter of the unobserved shadow cost of finance (l_{it}).	The unobserved shadow cost of finance (λ_{it}) of the Euler equation model is set to be a function of observable firm characteristics (used as instruments) such that: $\lambda_{it} = \beta_1 L_{it} + \beta_2 M_{it}$ Therefore, financial constraints will depend on the variables L and M. The index is built with the coefficients: $Index_{it} = \beta_1 L_{it} + \beta_2 M_{it}$	Can be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Sample-specific; Consistency of underlying structural model; Complexity.	Whited and Wu (2006)
(Continued)						

Measures	Data	Strategy	Typical regression/question used	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example
MDA index (Continuous)	BS	Use a segmenting variable to perform MDA and assign firms into mutually exclusive groups; Estimate parameters of the index through the impact of variables that influence the assignment of firms into the different groups.	Determinants of financial constraints affect the score Z, that is used to discriminate groups: $Z_i = \beta_1 L_i + \beta_2 M_i + \varepsilon_{i1}$ The variables L and M discriminate firms between mutually exclusive groups; The coefficients are used to build the index of the form: $Index_{i_k} = \beta_1 L_{i_k} + \beta_2 M_{i_k}$	Can be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Availability data; Use of segmenting variable.	Cleary (1999)
Class Ranking index (Ordinal)	BS	Build a score of a number of proxies, based on the relative position of a firm within a class (e.g. industry).	For each proxy L and M, the relative values to the class k average is L_{ik}/L_{tk} ; M_{ik}/M_{tk} The quantiles of order p of the resulting distributions are respectively $\varepsilon_{FL;p}$; $\varepsilon_{GM;p}$ Build scores $S_{i,L}$ and $S_{i,M}$ with 1/p classes for each proxy and each firm. Combine the proxy scores to obtain a final score of financial constraints (different types combinations are possible). The simplest is just the sum of scores: $S_i = S_{i,L} + S_{i,M}$	Availability of data; Can be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Comparability across classes; Non-monotonic relationships between proxies and financial constraints.	Musso and Schiavo (2008) Silva (2011)

(Continued)

Measures	Data	Strategy	Typical regression/question used	Advantages	Disadvantages	Example
Other						
Firm CFS (Continuous)	BS	Mimic CFS types of measures through: i) time averages weighted by CF; ii) estimating firm-specific slopes of a typical CFS regression.	$HH_i = \sum_{k=1}^n \left(\frac{\left(\frac{CF}{K} \right)_i}{\sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{CF}{K} \right)_i} * \left(\frac{I}{K} \right)_i \right) - \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{I}{K} \right)_i$ or $\left(\frac{I}{K} \right)_i = \alpha_i Q_i + EVP_i \left(\frac{CF}{K} \right)_i + \varepsilon_i$ Where β_i is the firm-specific index of financial constraints.	Easy to compute (HH); Availability of data; Can be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific.	Not time-varying; Assumes CFS effectively measures constraints; Fails to control for investment opportunities and other relevant variables (HH); Requires different estimation techniques (EVP).	HH (2009) EVP (2008)
Credit Ratings (Ordinal)	Ratings	Match firm information with rating.	Use the credit rating available for each firm The rating represents the markets' perception of a firm's risk. Lower ratings signal higher financial constraints.	Availability data; Represents the market's perception; Can easily be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific, and time-varying.	Relies on credit agencies; Small and biased samples (only few firms are rated).	Bottazzi et al. (2008)
Proxies (Continuous)	BS	Use one of established proxies in the estimation.	Common proxies: CF; Cash stocks; Size; Age; Export; R&D intensity; Leverage; Dividend policy; Group membership, Ownership, among others.	Simplicity; Availability of data; Can easily be used as dependent or explanatory variable; Firm-specific and time-varying.	Weak correlation; Relies on previously devised relationships; Non-monotonic relationships between the proxy and financial constraints;	

Notes: BS stands for firms' balance sheet information, FM for financial markets information, MDA for multiple discriminant analysis and CFS for cash-flow sensitivity. CF is cash-flow, K is capital, I is investment, Q is Tobin's Q or an appropriate proxy (such as average Q), C is real cash-flow, B is debt, A is total assets, Y is sales, OM is operating margin, i and t under scripts stand for individual (firm) and time, ε is an error term

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