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Gunes Kamber

Reserve Bank of New Zealand
Bank for International Settlements and
Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis, ANU

James Morley

University of New South Wales and
Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis, ANU

Benjamin Wong

Reserve Bank of New Zealand and
Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis, ANU

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Keywords

Beveridge-Nelson decomposition, output gap, signal-to-noise ratio

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Address for correspondence:

(E) cama.admin@anu.edu.au

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Intuitive and Reliable Estimates of the Output Gap from a Beveridge-Nelson Filter ^{*†}

Güneş Kamber^{1,2,4}, James Morley^{3,4}, and Benjamin Wong^{1,4}

¹Reserve Bank of New Zealand

²Bank for International Settlements

³University of New South Wales

⁴Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis, The Australian National University

Abstract

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*Kamber: gunes.kamber@bis.org Morley: james.morley@unsw.edu.au Wong: benjamin.wong@rbnz.govt.nz

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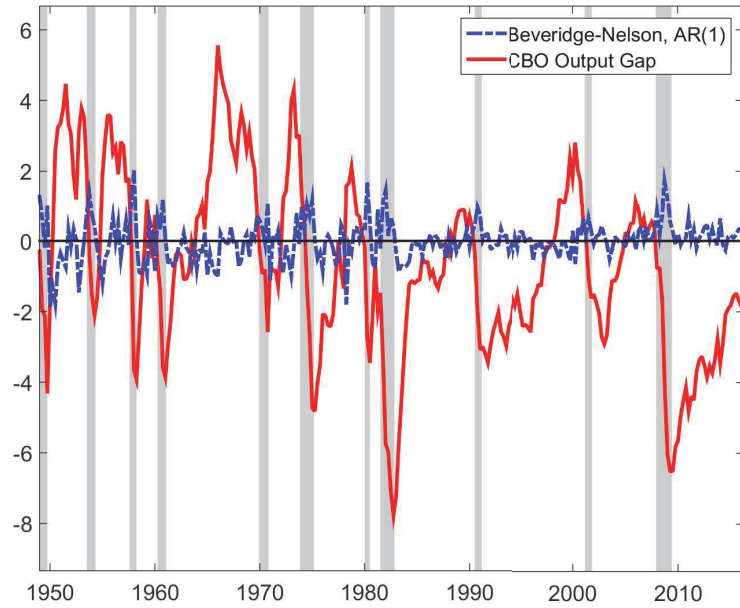
1 Introduction

The output gap is often conceived of as encompassing transitory movements in log real GDP at business cycle frequencies. Because the Beveridge and Nelson (1981) (BN) trend-cycle decomposition defines the trend of a time series as its long-run conditional expectation after all forecastable momentum has died out (and subtracting off any deterministic drift), the corresponding cycle for log real GDP should provide a sensible estimate of the output gap as long as it is based on accurate forecasts over short and medium term horizons. Noting that standard model selection criteria suggest a low-order autoregressive (AR) model predicts U.S. quarterly real GDP growth better than more complicated alternatives, Figure 1 plots the estimate of the output gap from the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model.¹ What is immediately noticeable about the estimated output gap is its small amplitude and lack of persistence. Its movements also do not match up well at all with the reference cycle of U.S. expansions and recessions determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER). For comparison, Figure 1 also plots an estimate of the U.S. output gap based on the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimate of potential output. In contrast to the estimate from the BN decomposition, the CBO output gap has much higher persistence and larger amplitude. Its movements are also strongly procyclical in terms of the NBER reference cycle. An important reason for these differences is that the estimate of the autoregressive coefficient for the AR(1) model used in the BN decomposition implies a very high signal-to-noise ratio in terms of the variance of trend shocks as a fraction of the overall quarterly forecast error variance, while the CBO implicitly assume a much lower signal-to-noise ratio when constructing its estimate.

Our main contribution in this paper is to show how to conduct a BN decomposition imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio on an AR model, an approach we refer to as the “BN filter”. The BN filter is easy to implement in comparison to related methods that also seek to address the conflicting results in Figure 1, such as Bayesian estimation of an unobserved components (UC) model with a smoothing prior on the signal-to-noise ratio (e.g., Harvey et al., 2007). Notably,

¹The raw data for U.S. real GDP are taken from FRED for the sample period of 1947Q1-2016Q2. Real GDP growth is measured in continuously-compounded terms. Model estimation is based on least squares regression or, equivalently, conditional maximum likelihood estimation under the assumption of normality. Initial lagged values for AR(p) models are backcast using the sample average growth rate. Our specific choice of lag order $p=1$ is based on the Schwarz Information Criterion.

Figure 1: Two contrasting estimates of the U.S. output gap



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The Beveridge-Nelson decomposition estimate of the output gap is based on an AR(1) model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth estimated via MLE. The CBO output gap is derived from the natural log of real GDP minus the natural log of the CBO's estimate of potential output. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

when we apply the BN filter to U.S. log real GDP, the resulting estimate of the output gap is persistent and has large amplitude, while its movements match up well with the NBER reference cycle. At the same time, real-time estimates are subject to smaller revisions and appear to be more accurate in the sense of performing better in out-of-sample forecasts of output growth and inflation than real-time estimates for other trend-cycle decomposition methods that also impose a low signal-to-noise ratio, including deterministic detrending using a quadratic trend, the Hodrick-Prescott (HP) filter, and the bandpass (BP) filter. Thus, our proposed approach directly addresses a key critique by Orphanides and van Norden (2002) that popular methods of estimating the output gap are unreliable in real time.

That Orphanides and van Norden (2002) find output gap estimates unreliable in real time dramatically undermines their usefulness in policy environments and in forming a meaningful gauge of current economic slack more generally. Meanwhile, the fact that the BN filter estimates are not heavily revised is not coincidental, but stems from our choice to work within

the context of AR models. In principle, the BN decomposition can be applied using any forecasting model, including multivariate time series models such as vector autoregressive (VAR) models, structural models such as dynamic stochastic general equilibrium (DSGE) models, or even nonlinear time series models such as time varying parameter (TVP) or Markov switching (MS) models. Our choice to work with AR models is deliberate. Because the estimated output gap for a BN decomposition directly reflects the estimated parameters of the model, it is mechanical that any instability in the estimated parameters in real time will produce estimates of the output gap that are heavily revised. However, estimates of autoregressive coefficients for AR models of real GDP growth turn out to be relatively stable in real time, unlike with parameters for more complicated models. Therefore, a natural outcome of our modeling choice is output gap estimates that are reliable in the sense of being subject to small revisions. Meanwhile, the out-of-sample forecasting results are suggestive of reliability in the sense of being more accurate than other methods. Also supportive of greater accuracy, we find that the revised estimate from the BN filter is much more positively correlated with the Chicago Fed’s index of economic activity based on 85 data series than are the other more heavily-revised output gap estimates, while the real-time estimate from the BN filter is more (typically negatively) correlated with future revisions in other estimates than other real-time estimates are correlated with future revisions in the estimate from the BN filter.

Our proposed approach is robust to the omission of multivariate information in the forecasting model and can account for structural breaks in the long-run growth rate, thus addressing important issues with trend-cycle decomposition raised by Evans and Reichlin (1994) and Perron and Wada (2009). Meanwhile, because we use the BN decomposition, our proposed approach explicitly takes account of a random walk stochastic trend in log real GDP and implicitly allows for correlation between movements in trend and cycle, unlike many popular methods that assume trend stationarity or that these movements are orthogonal. See Nelson and Kang (1981), Cogley and Nason (1995), Murray (2003), and Phillips and Jin (2015), amongst others, on the problem of “spurious cycles” in the presence of a random walk stochastic trend when using popular methods of trend-cycle decomposition such as deterministic detrending, the HP filter, and the BP filter. Meanwhile, see Morley et al. (2003), Dungey et al. (2015), and Chan and

Grant (forthcoming) on the importance of allowing for correlation between permanent and transitory movements. Application of the BN filter to data for other countries confirms its ability to produce intuitive estimates of output gaps and suggests strong Okun’s Law relationships when also considering unemployment gaps.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents our proposed approach and applies it to U.S. quarterly log real GDP, formally assessing its revision properties relative to other methods. Section 3 provides a justification for our approach, in particular why one might choose to impose a lower signal-to-noise ratio on an AR model than is implied by sample estimates, and then presents forecast comparisons with other methods and considers whether large revisions are useful for understanding the past. Section 4 considers how to modify our approach to account for structural breaks and applies it to other data series. Section 5 concludes.

2 Our Approach

2.1 The BN Decomposition and the Signal-to-Noise Ratio

Beveridge and Nelson (1981) define the trend of a time series as its long-run conditional expectation minus any *a priori* known (i.e., deterministic) future movements in the time series. In particular, letting $\{y_t\}$ denote a time series process with a trend component that follows a random walk with constant drift, the BN trend, τ_t^{BN} , at time t is

$$\tau_t^{BN} = \lim_{j \rightarrow \infty} \mathbb{E}_t [y_{t+j} - j \cdot \mathbb{E}[\Delta y]] . \quad (1)$$

The simple intuition behind the BN decomposition is that the long-horizon conditional expectation of a time series is the same as the long-horizon conditional expectation of the trend component under the assumption that the long-horizon conditional expectation of the remaining cycle component goes to zero. By removing the deterministic drift, the conditional expectation in equation (1) remains finite and becomes an optimal estimate (in a minimum mean squared error sense) of the current trend component (see Watson, 1986; Morley et al., 2003).

To implement the BN decomposition, it is typical to specify a stationary forecasting model

for the first differences $\{\Delta y_t\}$ of the time series. Modeling the first differences in this way directly allows for a random walk stochastic trend in the level of the time series because forecast errors for the first differences can be estimated to have permanent effects on the long-horizon conditional expectation of $\{y_t\}$.

Based on sample autocorrelation functions (ACFs) and partial autocorrelation functions (PACFs) for many macroeconomic time series, including the first differences of U.S. quarterly log real GDP, it is natural when implementing the BN decomposition to consider an AR(p) forecasting model:

$$\Delta y_t = c + \sum_{j=1}^p \phi_j \Delta y_{t-j} + e_t, \quad (2)$$

where the forecast error $e_t \sim iidN(0, \sigma_e^2)$.² For convenience when defining the signal-to-noise ratio below, let $\phi(L) \equiv 1 - \phi_1 L - \dots - \phi_p L^p$ denote the autoregressive lag polynomial, where L is the lag operator. Then, assuming the roots of $\phi(z) = 0$ lie outside the unit circle, which corresponds to $\{\Delta y_t\}$ being stationary, the unconditional mean $\mu \equiv \mathbb{E}[\Delta y] = \phi(1)^{-1}c$ exists. Using the state-space approach to calculating the BN decomposition in Morley (2002), the BN cycle, c_t^{BN} , at time t for this model is

$$c_t^{BN} = -[1 \quad 0 \quad \dots \quad 0]F(I - F)^{-1}X_t, \quad (3)$$

where $X_t = (\Delta \tilde{y}_t, \Delta \tilde{y}_{t-1}, \dots, \Delta \tilde{y}_{t-p+1})'$, with $\Delta \tilde{y}_t \equiv \Delta y_t - \mu$ denoting the deviation from the un-

²The normality assumption is not strictly necessary for the BN decomposition. However, under normality, least squares regression for an AR model becomes equivalent to conditional maximum likelihood estimation, while the Bayesian shrinkage priors used in our approach, as discussed in the next subsection, become conjugate, making posterior calculations straightforward. Also, the forecast errors do not need to be identically distributed, as long as they form a martingale difference sequence. However, in terms of possible structural breaks in the variance of the forecast error, the key underlying assumption we make in our proposed approach is that there are no changes in the signal-to-noise ratio, as defined in this subsection below, an assumption which is implicitly supported by the relative stability of the estimated sum of the autoregressive coefficients across possible variance regimes within the sample.

conditional mean, and F is the companion matrix for the $AR(p)$ model:

$$F = \begin{bmatrix} \phi_1 & \phi_2 & \cdots & \phi_p \\ 1 & 0 & \cdots & 0 \\ 0 & \ddots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \vdots & \ddots & 1 & 0 \end{bmatrix}.$$

Although an $AR(1)$ forecasting model might, in particular, seem reasonable for U.S. real GDP growth given sample ACFs and PACFs and is supported by the Schwarz Information Criterion (SIC), we have already seen in Figure 1 that the estimated output gap from a BN decomposition based on an $AR(1)$ model does not match well at all with widely-held beliefs about the amplitude, persistence, and sign of transitory movements in economic activity as reflected, for example, in the CBO output gap. Most noticeably, the estimated output gap is small in amplitude, suggesting that most of the fluctuations in economic activity have been driven by trend.

To understand why the BN decomposition based on an $AR(1)$ model in Figure 1 produces an estimated output gap with such features, it is helpful to note from equation (3) that the BN cycle in this case is simply $-\phi(1 - \phi)^{-1}\Delta\tilde{y}_t$. Therefore, by construction, the estimated output gap will only be as persistent as output growth itself, which is not very persistent given that $\hat{\phi}$ based on maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) is typically between 0.3 and 0.4 for U.S. quarterly data. Similarly, given that $\hat{\phi}(1 - \hat{\phi})^{-1} \approx 0.5$, the amplitude of the estimated output gap will be small, as the implied variance will only be about one quarter that of output growth itself. Furthermore, given that $-\hat{\phi}(1 - \hat{\phi})^{-1} < 0$, it is not surprising that the estimated output gap generally increases in recessions when output growth becomes negative and vice versa in expansions. In terms of the intuition underlying the BN decomposition, the momentum in output growth implied by the $AR(1)$ model means that when there is a negative shock in a recession, output growth is expected to remain below average in the quarters immediately afterwards before eventually returning back to its long-run average, with the converse holding for a positive shock in an expansion. Thus, log real GDP will initially be above the BN trend defined as the long-run conditional expectation minus deterministic drift when a shock triggers

a recession and below the BN trend when a shock triggers an expansion.

More generally, to understand the BN decomposition for an $AR(p)$ model, it is useful to define a signal-to-noise ratio for a time series in terms of the variance of trend shocks as a fraction of the overall forecast error variance:

$$\delta \equiv \sigma_{\Delta\tau}^2 / \sigma_e^2 = \psi(1)^2, \quad (4)$$

where $\psi(1) \equiv \lim_{j \rightarrow \infty} \frac{\partial y_{t+j}}{\partial e_t}$ is the “long-run multiplier” that captures the permanent effect of a forecast error on the long-horizon conditional expectation of $\{y_t\}$ and provides the key summary statistic for a time series process when calculating the BN trend based on a forecasting model given that $\Delta\tau_t^{BN} = \psi(1)e_t$.³ For an $AR(p)$ model, this long-run multiplier has the simple form of $\psi(1) = \phi(1)^{-1}$ and, based on MLE for an $AR(1)$ model of postwar U.S. quarterly real GDP growth, the signal-to-noise ratio appears to be quite high with $\hat{\delta} = 2.22$. That is, BN trend shocks are much more volatile than quarter-to-quarter forecast errors in log real GDP, leading to an estimated output gap with small amplitude and generally counterintuitive sign. Notably, however, $\hat{\delta} > 1$ holds for all freely estimated $AR(p)$ models given that $\hat{\phi}(1)^{-1}$ is always greater than unity regardless of lag order p . Thus, many of the surprising results for a BN decomposition based on an $AR(1)$ model carry over to higher-order $AR(p)$ models, although the estimated output gap no longer has to have the same persistence as output growth and will not be perfectly correlated with $\Delta\tilde{y}_t$ given that, as can be seen from equation (3), the BN cycle depends on a linear combination of current and lagged values of output growth, rather than just the current value, as is the case with the $AR(1)$ model.

2.2 Imposing a Low Signal-to-Noise Ratio

The insight that the signal-to-noise ratio δ is mechanically linked to $\phi(1)$ for an $AR(p)$ model is a powerful one because it implies that we can impose a low signal-to-noise ratio by fixing

³An implicit equivalence between the variance of trend shocks, $\sigma_{\Delta\tau}^2$, and the variance of the changes in the BN trend follows from the equivalence of the spectral density at frequency zero for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ based on the reduced-form forecasting model and a more structural representation that separates out the true permanent and transitory shocks, but implies the same autocovariance structure as the reduced-form model. Note that, as found in Morley (2011) and discussed below in Section 3, a similar equivalence does not hold for the variance of the transitory component and the variance of the BN cycle.

the sum of the autoregressive coefficients when estimating an $AR(p)$ model. To do so, we transform the $AR(p)$ model in equation (2) into its Dickey-Fuller representation, which we also write in terms of deviations from the unconditional mean for convenience when implementing our approach:

$$\Delta \tilde{y}_t = \rho \Delta \tilde{y}_{t-1} + \sum_{j=1}^{p-1} \phi_j^* \Delta^2 \tilde{y}_{t-j} + e_t, \quad (5)$$

where $\rho \equiv \phi_1 + \phi_2 + \dots + \phi_p = 1 - \phi(1)$ and $\phi_j^* \equiv -(\phi_{j+1} + \dots + \phi_p)$. Then, noting that $\delta = (1 - \rho)^{-2}$ for an $AR(p)$ model, equation (5) can be estimated imposing a particular signal-to-noise ratio $\bar{\delta}$ by fixing ρ as follows:

$$\bar{\rho} = 1 - 1/\sqrt{\bar{\delta}}. \quad (6)$$

The BN decomposition can then be applied imposing a particular signal-to-noise ratio $\bar{\delta}$ by solving for the restricted estimates of $\{\phi_j\}_{j=1}^p$ by inverting the Dickey-Fuller transformation given $\bar{\rho}$ and estimates of $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$ and calculating the BN cycle as in equation (3).

Before discussing estimation of the model in equation (5) and how we choose $\bar{\delta}$ in practice, it is helpful to explain why we need to consider a higher-order $AR(p)$ model in order to impose a low signal-to-noise ratio. In particular, if one were seeking to maximize the amplitude of the output gap, it turns out an $AR(1)$ model would be a poor choice because the stationarity restriction $|\phi| < 1$ implies $\delta > 0.25$, which is to say trend shocks must explain at least 25% of the quarterly forecast error variance. Higher-order $AR(p)$ models allow lower values of δ (e.g., $\delta > 0.0625$ for an $AR(2)$ model), although a finite-order $AR(p)$ model would never be able to achieve $\delta = 0$ given that this limiting case would actually correspond to a non-invertible MA process with a unit MA root (i.e., $\{y_t\}$ would actually be level or trend stationary, so $\{\Delta y_t\}$ would, in effect, be “over-differenced”). Also, as noted above, consideration of a higher-order $AR(p)$ model allows for different persistence in the output gap and different correlation with output growth than is possible for an $AR(1)$ model.

Given a higher-order $AR(p)$ model, estimation of equation (5) imposing a particular signal-to-noise ratio is straightforward without the need of complicated nonlinear restrictions or pos-

terior simulation.⁴ Conditional MLE entails a single parametric restriction $\rho = \bar{\rho}$, which can be imposed by bringing $\bar{\rho}\Delta\tilde{y}_{t-1}$ to the left-hand-side when running a least squares regression for equation (5). However, even though it is possible to implement our approach using MLE, we opt for Bayesian estimation in practice because it allows us to utilize a shrinkage prior on the higher lags of the $AR(p)$ model in order to prevent overfitting and to mitigate the challenge of how to specify the exact lag order beyond being large enough to accommodate small values of δ . We thus consider a “Minnesota”-type prior on the second-difference coefficients $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$ as follows:

$$\phi_j^* \sim N(0, \frac{0.5}{j^2}).$$

In practice, we consider an $AR(12)$ model, although our results are robust to consideration of higher lag orders given the shrinkage prior. Readers familiar with the Minnesota class of priors will recognize that, conditional on σ_e^2 , the posterior distribution for $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$ will have a closed-form solution and can be easily calculated without the need for posterior simulation. For simplicity, we condition on the least squares estimate for σ_e^2 using the sample mean for μ , which is equivalent to assuming a flat/improper prior for these parameters.⁵ However, it should be noted that the estimated output gap is highly robust to conditioning on different values for σ_e^2 .⁶

All that remains is to choose a particular value of $\bar{\delta}$ to impose. We see this choice as a dogmatic prior based on beliefs about large transitory movements in economic activity as reflected in, say, the CBO output gap in Figure 1. This dogmatic prior is analogous to the imposition of a low signal-to-noise ratio by fixing $\lambda = 1600$ when implementing the HP filter for quarterly data under the assumption $\{y_t\}$ follows a UC process with a stochastic trend (see

⁴It would, of course, also be possible to impose a low signal-to-noise ratio for a more general ARMA model. However, estimation would be far less straightforward, there would be greater tendency to overfit the data given well-known problems of weak identification and near-cancellation of roots, and the corresponding BN decomposition would be less reliable.

⁵In the case of a time series with no drift, such as is the case with U.S. unemployment rate data, it is possible to impose $\mu = 0$ by simply setting $\Delta\tilde{y}_t = \Delta y_t$.

⁶The estimated output gap is virtually identical when halving or doubling σ_e^2 compared to the least squares estimate. Meanwhile, it would be possible to place an informative prior on σ_e^2 and still solve the posterior for the autoregressive coefficients analytically by using dummy observations. However, given that this would require eliciting an explicit prior in any particular application, while having virtually no impact on the results for the BN decomposition, we employ the flat/improper prior for simplicity.

Harvey and Jaeger (1993)).⁷

Imposing a dogmatic prior could be as simple as setting $\bar{\delta}$ to a particular low value such as, for example, $\bar{\delta} = 0.05$, which would correspond to the strict belief that only 5% of the quarterly forecast error variance for output growth is due to trend shocks. However, we recognize that any such particular choice for $\bar{\delta}$ might appear somewhat arbitrary in practice. Therefore, we propose an automatic selection of $\bar{\delta}$ based on the implied amplitude-to-noise ratio:

$$\alpha(\delta) \equiv \sigma_c^2(\delta) / \sigma_e^2(\delta)$$

where, noting the implicit dependence on the signal-to-noise ratio δ through ρ and $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$, $\sigma_c^2(\delta)$ is the variance of the corresponding BN cycle in equation (3) and $\sigma_e^2(\delta)$ is the variance of the forecast error for the corresponding restricted version of the AR(p) model in equation (5).⁸ For the automatic selection, $\bar{\delta}$ is chosen to maximize the signal-to-noise ratio as follows:

$$\bar{\delta} = \inf\{\delta > 0 : \alpha'(\delta) = 0, \alpha''(\delta) < 0\},$$

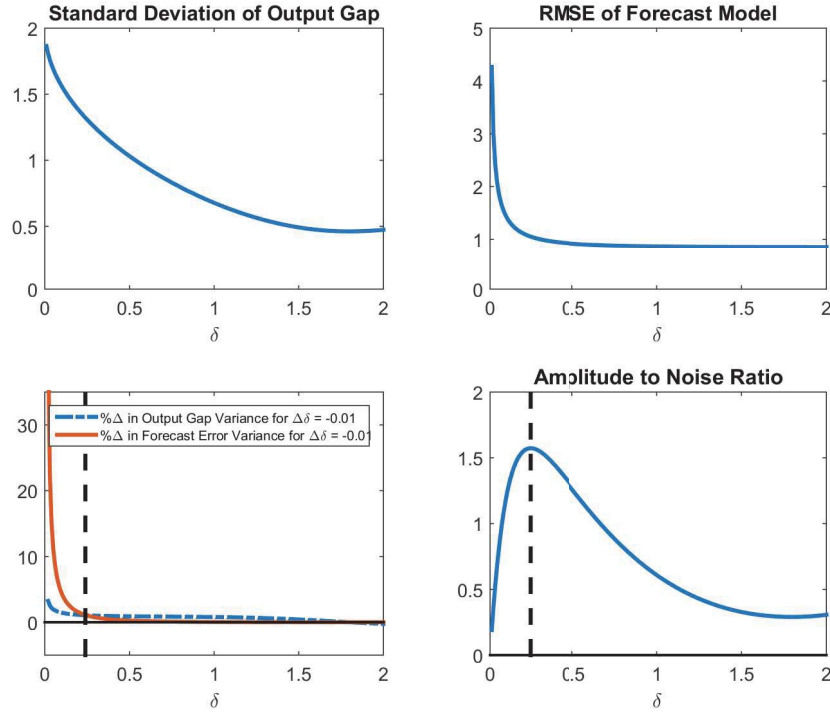
This is still a dogmatic prior in the sense that, even in large samples, $\bar{\delta}$ will generally be smaller than if it were freely estimated (e.g., if, instead, $\bar{\delta} = \operatorname{argmin} \sigma_e^2(\delta)$).⁹ However, given the use of a local maximizer for values of δ close to zero, the prior is now framed in terms of the amplitude-to-noise ratio being “large” for a low signal-to-noise ratio rather than in terms of

⁷Under the assumption that $\{y_t\}$ is level or trend stationary, the HP filter can be interpreted as an approximate high-pass frequency-domain filter and the choice of $\lambda = 1600$ for quarterly data has an interpretation of isolating transitory movements at particular frequencies that are often associated with the business cycle. In applying the BN decomposition, we take it as a given that $\{y_t\}$ can contain a stochastic trend. Thus, we do not frame the choice of $\bar{\delta}$ in terms of what frequencies it isolates under the assumption that $\{y_t\}$ is stationary. However, we examine the sample periodogram for the estimated output gap to determine what frequencies are being highlighted and confirm that they correspond closely to those highlighted by the HP and BP filters and that are often associated with business cycles. We thank a referee for suggesting this comparison and the results are available in the online appendix.

⁸The analytical expression for the variance of the BN cycle is given in the online appendix. However, in practice, when implementing our approach to selecting $\bar{\delta}$, we simply calculate the sample variance of the estimated output gap. Likewise, it is important to note that we use the sample variance of the forecast errors from the restricted model rather than the posterior estimate of σ_e^2 , which actually corresponds to the least squares estimate for the unrestricted model.

⁹We have confirmed this with a Monte Carlo simulation in the online appendix, with the downward bias much larger when the true signal-to-noise ratio is large than when it is small. Note that this approach of imposing a dogmatic prior to induce a downward bias on the signal-to-noise ratio is related to, but different than the suggestion in Bewley (2002) of using Bayesian estimation to offset biases in least squares estimates of autoregressive parameters.

Figure 2: Tradeoff across different signal-to-noise ratios between amplitude of the estimated U.S. output gap based on the BN decomposition and forecasting model fit



Notes: δ is the signal-to-noise ratio in terms of the variance of the trend shocks as a fraction of the overall quarterly forecast error variance. The estimated output gap is for a BN decomposition based on Bayesian estimation of an AR(12) model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth with shrinkage priors on second-difference coefficients and different values of δ .

the signal-to-noise ratio taking on a particular low value. To be clear, this is not the same as simply maximizing the amplitude of the estimated output gap. It will still rule out even lower values of δ that would increase amplitude, but not enough compared to worsening the fit of the forecasting model. Specifically, maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio will balance this tradeoff between amplitude and fit by equating the percentage increase in the variance of the BN cycle with the percentage decrease in the variance of the forecast error.

To provide a visual perspective on our approach, Figure 2 plots the relationships for the U.S. data between δ and the standard deviation of the estimated output gap, the RMSE of the restricted forecasting model, the percentage changes in the corresponding variances for a decrease in the signal-to-noise ratio of $\Delta\delta = -0.01$, and the implied amplitude-to-noise ratio. In the first panel, the relationship between δ and the amplitude of the output gap is non-monotonic, with

an inflection around 1.75, below which there is a steady increase in amplitude as δ gets smaller. Meanwhile, the relationship between δ and the RMSE of the forecasting model considered in the second panel is also non-monotonic (the minimum, not displayed, is at $\delta = 2.25$, which reflecting the impact of the shrinkage priors on the second-difference coefficients is closer to the MLE for an AR(1) model than for an AR(12) model), but is relatively flat except when δ is very close to zero, at which point decreasing δ has a deleterious impact on fit. In the third panel, it can be seen that $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ (i.e., imposing that trend shocks account for 24% of the forecast error variance for quarterly output growth) optimizes the tradeoff between amplitude and fit in the sense that a decrease in δ below $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ worsens fit more in percentage terms than it increases amplitude. The fourth panel shows directly that $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ corresponds to the local maximum in the amplitude-to-noise ratio for values of δ closest to zero.

Because of the non-monotonicities of the relationships of δ with amplitude and fit, we focus on a local maximizer of the amplitude-to-noise ratio. In particular, for very large values of δ (much larger than the freely-estimated value), the amplitude-to-noise ratio actually becomes quite large and increasing with δ , meaning that a global maximum does not exist. However, because we are interested in imposing a dogmatic prior of a “low” signal-to-noise ratio, the local maximum for values of δ closest to zero provides a sensible basis for selecting $\bar{\delta}$.¹⁰ Meanwhile, as we show below, the shape of the output gap is highly robust to imposing other low values of $\bar{\delta}$. Therefore, a researcher with a particular dogmatic prior about the value of the signal-to-noise ratio could simply impose a low value such as $\bar{\delta} = 0.05$ and the estimated output gap would remain similarly intuitive and reliable.

2.3 The BN Filter and the Estimated Output Gap

Reflecting the similar smoothing effect on the implied trend as for the HP filter when imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio, we refer to our proposed approach as the “BN filter”.¹¹ To summarize,

¹⁰As a check on the reasonableness of restricting fit to increase amplitude in this way, we also consider the prior predictive density for the restricted model. We find that 82% of the postwar observations for U.S. real GDP growth lie within the equal-tailed 90% bands of the conditional prior predictive density. In this sense, our restricted AR(12) model with $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ and shrinkage priors on the second-difference coefficients, while clearly different than what would be freely estimated by MLE, is not strongly at odds with the data.

¹¹We note that a few previous papers refer to a “BN filter”, but always as an alternative terminology for the traditional BN decomposition, which does not impose a smoothing effect on the trend.

it has three steps:

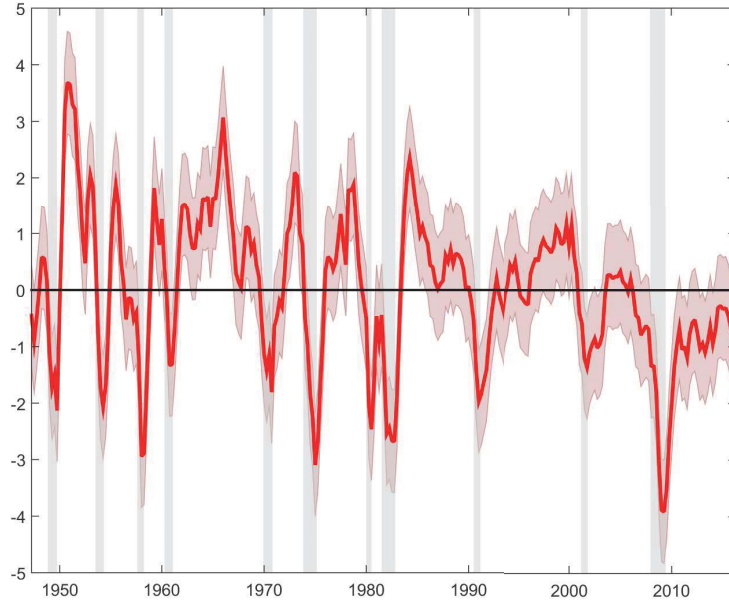
1. Set a low $\bar{\delta}$. We employ an automatic selection based on the local maximum of the implied amplitude-to-noise ratio for values of δ closest to zero. This is done by repeating steps 2 and 3 below for proposed incremental increases in $\bar{\delta}$ from an initial increment just above zero until the estimated amplitude-to-noise ratio $\hat{\sigma}_c^2(\bar{\delta})/\hat{\sigma}_e^2(\bar{\delta})$ decreases.
2. Given $\bar{\delta}$, estimate the Dickey-Fuller transformed AR(p) model in equation (5) imposing $\bar{\rho} = 1 - 1/\sqrt{\bar{\delta}}$. We conduct Bayesian estimation assuming implicit flat/improper priors for μ and σ_e^2 and a “Minnesota”-type shrinkage prior for $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$. We set $p = 12$, but our results are robust to higher values of p given the shrinkage prior.
3. Given $\bar{\rho}$ and estimates of $\{\phi_j^*\}_{j=1}^{p-1}$, solve for restricted estimates of $\{\phi_j\}_{j=1}^p$ by inverting the Dickey-Fuller transformation and apply the BN decomposition as in equation (3).

Figure 3 plots the estimated U.S. output gap along with 95% confidence bands for the BN filter with $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ determined by automatic selection based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio. A cursory glance at the figure suggests that the BN filter is much more successful than the traditional BN decomposition based on a freely estimated AR model at producing an estimated output gap that is consistent with widely-held beliefs about amplitude, persistence, and the sign of transitory movements in economic activity. In particular, the estimated output gap is large in amplitude, persistent, and moves procyclically with the NBER reference cycle. Referring back to Figure 1, the correlation with the CBO output gap is reasonably high at 0.75 rather than -0.30 for the estimate from a BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model. Meanwhile, the 95% confidence bands are based on inverting a simple z -test that the true output gap, c_t , is equal to a hypothesized value based on the unbiasedness, variance, and assumed normality of the BN cycle.¹² The estimates appear reasonably precise and are significantly different from zero at many points throughout the sample, especially during recessions.¹³

¹²Details for how we calculate confidence bands for a BN cycle are provided in the online appendix.

¹³All of the methods considered in this paper effectively impose a mean of zero on the estimated output gap by construction. However, the significantly negative estimates from the BN filter during recessions are consistent with the findings in Morley and Piger (2012) and Morley and Panovska (2016) using weighted averages of model-based trend-cycle decompositions for linear and nonlinear time series models that the output gap is asymmetric in the sense of being generally close to zero during expansions, but large and negative during recessions.

Figure 3: Estimated U.S. output gap from the BN filter with 95% confidence bands



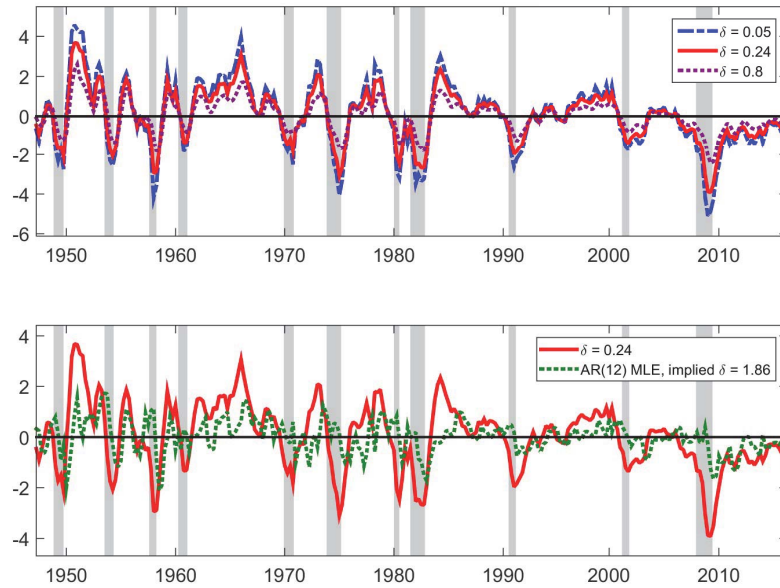
Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. “BN filter” refers to our proposed approach of estimating the output gap using the BN decomposition based on Bayesian estimation of an AR(12) model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth with shrinkage priors on second-difference coefficients and imposing the signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. The solid line is the estimate. Shaded bands around the estimate correspond to a 95% confidence interval from inverting a z -test that the true output gap is equal to a hypothesized value using the standard deviation of the BN cycle. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

Before examining the reliability of our approach, we consider the sensitivity of the estimated output gap to varying the signal-to-noise ratio. The top panel of Figure 4 plots the estimated output gap for $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$ compared against our approach where $\delta = 0.24$. The shape of the estimated output gap is little changed, with the persistence profile virtually unaltered. Indeed, the correlation between the different estimated output gaps varying the signal-to-noise ratio is well in excess of 0.95. Because the profile of fluctuations in the estimated output gap are similar even as we change the signal-to-noise ratio, the revision properties and real time forecast performance will be highly robust to the exact value of δ , at least as long as it is below one.¹⁴

Meanwhile, given this apparent robustness to different values of δ , we check whether our results are actually being driven by the AR(12) specification rather than imposing a low signal-

¹⁴All of the results for $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$ are reported in the online appendix.

Figure 4: U.S. output gap estimates based on the BN decomposition when varying the signal-to-noise ratio



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The different lines in the top panel are for a BN decomposition based on Bayesian estimation of an AR(12) model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth with shrinkage priors on second-difference coefficients imposing different signal-to-noise ratios. In the bottom panel, “AR(12) MLE” refers to the BN decomposition based on an AR(12) model estimated via MLE. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

to-noise ratio. To do this, we compare the estimated output gap from the BN filter to that produced by the BN decomposition based on an AR(12) model freely estimated via MLE. The bottom panel of Figure 4 plots the two output gap estimates and makes it clear that imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio is crucial. For the freely estimated AR(12) model, we obtain $\hat{\delta} = 1.86$ and the correlation between the two estimates is only 0.39. Also, as shown below, the revision properties and forecast performance are not as good when using the BN decomposition based on a freely estimated AR(12) model as they are for the BN filter.

2.4 Revision Properties of the BN Filter and Other Methods

Having proposed a BN filter that imposes a low signal-to-noise ratio and applied it to U.S. log real GDP, we now assess its revision properties. As discussed in the introduction, by working with an AR model, we seek to address the Orphanides and van Norden (2002) critique that

popular methods of estimating the output gap are unreliable in real time. Orphanides and van Norden (2002) show that most real-time revisions of output gap estimates are due to the filtering method rather than data revisions for real GDP. Therefore, to focus on the revision properties of the filtering method in particular, we consider “pseudo-real-time” analysis using the final vintage of data (from 2016Q2) rather than a full-blown real-time analysis with different vintages of data. However, our results are generally robust to consideration of data revisions.¹⁵

To evaluate the performance of the BN filter, we compare it to several other methods of trend-cycle decomposition. First, we consider BN decompositions based on various freely estimated ARMA forecasting models of $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and Kalman filtering for a UC model of $\{y_t\}$. In particular, we consider BN decompositions based on an AR(1) model, an AR(12) model, and an ARMA(2,2) model, all estimated via MLE. We also consider a multivariate BN decomposition based on a VAR(4) model of U.S. real GDP growth and the civilian unemployment rate, also estimated via MLE. For the UC model, we consider a similar specification to Harvey (1985) and Clark (1987) estimated via MLE. The AR(1) model is chosen based on SIC for the whole set of possible ARMA models. The AR(12) model allows us to understand the effects of imposing a longer lag order, although we note that standard model selection criteria would generally lead a researcher to choose a more parsimonious specification in practice. Morley et al. (2003) show that the BN decomposition based on an ARMA(2,2) model is equivalent to Kalman filter inferences for an unrestricted version of the popular UC model by Watson (1986). In particular, the Watson UC model features a random walk with constant drift trend plus an AR(2) cycle, but, as Morley et al. (2003) show (also see Dungey et al., 2015; Chan and Grant, forthcoming), the zero restriction on the correlation between movements in trend and cycle can be rejected by statistical tests, suggesting the BN decomposition based on an unrestricted ARMA(2,2) model is the appropriate approach when considering UC models that feature a random walk trend with

¹⁵See the online appendix for the results in a full-blown real-time environment. Not only are the results generally robust, but the only major change is that the BN filter clearly outperforms the traditional BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model, the one other method that does comparatively well in the pseudo-real-time environment. We speculate that the reason for the improved relative performance of the BN filter when also allowing for data revisions is that the BN cycle for it is a weighted average of 12 quarters of real GDP growth, while the BN cycle based on an AR(1) model only reflects the current quarter. To the extent that most data revisions apply most heavily to the current quarter or even recent quarters, the estimated output gap for the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model will be more heavily revised with each data revision. More details are provided in the online appendix.

drift plus an AR(2) cycle. Meanwhile, for completeness, we also consider the Harvey-Clark UC model, similar to that considered by Orphanides and van Norden (2002). The Harvey-Clark UC model differs from the Watson (1986) model in that it also features a random walk drift in addition to a random walk trend. For this model, we retain the zero restrictions on correlations between movements in drift, trend, and cycle.

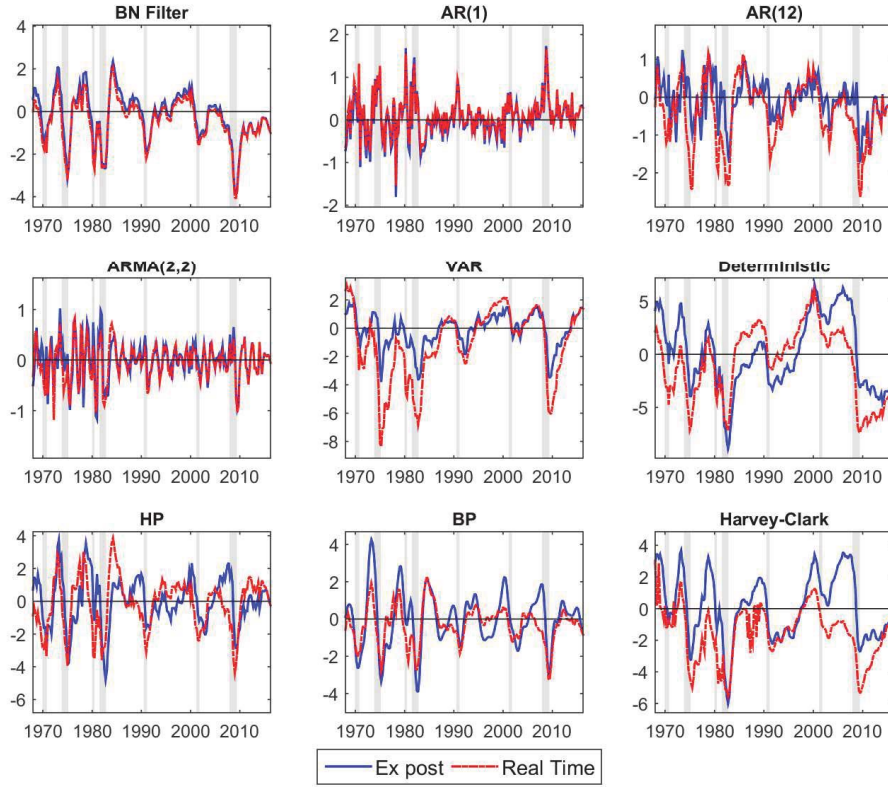
We also consider some popular methods of deterministic detrending and nonparametric filtering. In particular, we consider a deterministic quadratic trend, the Hodrick and Prescott (HP) (1997) filter, and the bandpass (BP) filter by Baxter and King (1999) and Christiano and Fitzgerald (2003). For the HP filter, we impose a smoothing parameter $\lambda = 1600$, as is standard for quarterly data. For the BP filter, we target frequencies with periods between 6 and 32 quarters, as is commonly done in business cycle analysis. It is worth noting that, whatever documented misgivings about the HP and BP filters (e.g., Cogley and Nason, 1995; Murray, 2003; Phillips and Jin, 2015), they are relatively easy to implement, including often being available in many canned statistical packages, and are widely used in practice. We report results for standard implementations, although we note that the results are virtually unchanged when padding the data with AR(4) forecasts to try to address endpoint problems, as done in Edge and Rudd (2016). This reflects the difficulty of accurately forecasting future output growth.

Figure 5 plots the pseudo-real-time and the ex post (i.e., full sample) estimates of the output gap from the BN filter and the various other methods.¹⁶ The first thing to notice is that all of the features of the output gap for the BN filter in Figure 3 carry over to the pseudo-real-time environment.¹⁷ Meanwhile, in contrast to the BN filter, both the AR(1) and ARMA(2,2) models produce output gap estimates that have little persistence, are small in amplitude, and do not move procyclically with the NBER reference cycle. Adding more lags impacts the persistence and sign of the estimated output gap, with the AR(12) model suggesting a more persistent output gap that moves procyclically with the NBER reference cycle. Even so, the estimated output gap for the AR(12) model still has relatively low amplitude, consistent with

¹⁶We start the pseudo-real-time analysis with raw data from 1947Q1 to 1968Q1 for U.S. real GDP and 1948Q1 to 1968Q1 for U.S. civilian unemployment rate and add one observation at a time until we reach the full sample that ends in 2016Q2. Again, all raw data are taken from FRED. As with real GDP growth, the unemployment rate is backcast using its pseudo-real-time sample average to allow the estimation sample to always begin in 1947Q2.

¹⁷We re-calculate $\bar{\delta}$ for each pseudo-real-time sample. Encouragingly, the values that maximize the amplitude-to-noise ratio are quite stable, fluctuating between 0.21-0.26.

Figure 5: Pseudo-real-time and ex post U.S. output gap estimates for various methods



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. “BN filter” refers to our proposed approach of estimating the output gap using the BN decomposition based on Bayesian estimation of an AR(12) model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth with shrinkage priors on second-difference coefficients and imposing a signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. “AR(1)”, “AR(12)”, and “ARMA(2,2)” refer to BN decompositions based on the respective models estimated via MLE. “VAR(4)” refers to the BN decomposition based on a VAR(4) model of output growth and the unemployment rate estimated via MLE. “Deterministic” refers to detrending based on least squares regression on a quadratic time trend. “HP” refers to the Hodrick and Prescott (1997) filter. “BP” refers to the bandpass filter of Christiano and Fitzgerald (2003). “Harvey-Clark” refers to the UC model as described by Harvey (1985) and Clark (1987). Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

our earlier observation that AR forecasting models estimated via MLE always imply a relatively high signal-to-noise ratio of $\hat{\delta} > 1$ for U.S. data. The BN decomposition for the VAR model suggests an output gap that is more persistent and larger in amplitude, consistent with the point made by Evans and Reichlin (1994) that adding relevant information for forecasting of output growth mechanically lowers the signal-to-noise ratio. Finally, the estimates for the other popular methods of trend-cycle decomposition are all reasonably intuitive in the sense of being persistent, large in amplitude, and generally moving procyclically in terms of the NBER reference cycle. However, it is notable how different they are from each other and from the rea-

sonably intuitive estimates based on the BN filter and the BN decompositions for the AR(12) model and the VAR model. Thus, being “intuitive” clearly cannot be a sufficient condition for choosing amongst competing methods. Hence, we also consider reliability, which is why, like Orphanides and van Norden (2002), we look at revision properties of the estimates, although we will also examine other aspects of reliability in the next section.

In terms of the revision properties of the output gap estimates, the main thing to notice in Figures 5 is that, regardless of the features in terms of persistence, amplitude, and sign, all of the estimates for various BN decompositions, including the BN filter, are subject to relatively small revisions in comparison to the other methods. The key reason why output gap estimates for the various BN decompositions are hardly revised is because the estimated parameters of the forecasting models turn out to be relatively stable when additional observations are considered in real time. Meanwhile, even though the output gap estimates using the BN decomposition appear relatively stable, the estimates for the more highly parameterized AR(12) and VAR(4) models are subject to larger revisions than the simpler AR(1) and ARMA(2,2) models. This suggests overparameterization and overfitting can compromise the real-time reliability of the BN decomposition.¹⁸ This is the main reason we impose a shrinkage prior when considering the highly parameterized AR(12) model in our proposed approach. In particular, the shrinkage prior prevents overfitting, while the high lag order still allows for relatively rich dynamics. The revision properties of the BN filter estimates, which are more similar to those for the AR(1) model than for the AR(12) model based on MLE suggest that our proposed approach achieves a reasonable compromise between avoiding potential overfitting and allowing for richer dynamics. Finally, all of the estimates for the other popular methods in Figure 5 are heavily revised and clearly unreliable in real time.¹⁹ In particular, the deterministic detrending is extremely

¹⁸Notably, as shown in the online appendix, the pseudo-real-time estimates for the AR(12) and VAR(4) models lie outside the ex post 95% confidence bands much more than 5% of the time, raising serious doubts about their reliability in terms of accuracy. At the same time, even the ex post estimates are not particularly precise, especially with the BN cycle for the VAR(4) model, which is significantly different than zero less than 5% of the time. The BN cycle for the ARMA(2,2) model is more accurate in the sense that the pseudo-real-time estimates lie within the ex post 95% confidence bands 100% of the time, but the ex post estimates are almost never statistically different than zero. Meanwhile, the pseudo-real-time estimates for the BN filter and the AR(1) model appear accurate, with the estimates within the ex post 95% confidence bands 100% of the time and the ex post estimates are relatively precise with the cycle being significantly different than zero about 40% and 30% of the time, respectively.

¹⁹As shown in the online appendix, the pseudo-real-time estimate for the Harvey-Clark UC model is inaccurate in the sense that it lies outside the 95% confidence bands about 25% of the time, similar to the BN decomposition for the AR(12) model. Meanwhile, the cycle is only significantly different than zero about 15% of the time, so it is

sensitive to the sample period, while the HP and BP filters and the Harvey-Clark estimates all suffer from the endpoint problems of two-sided filters or smoothed inferences in the case of the Harvey-Clark model.

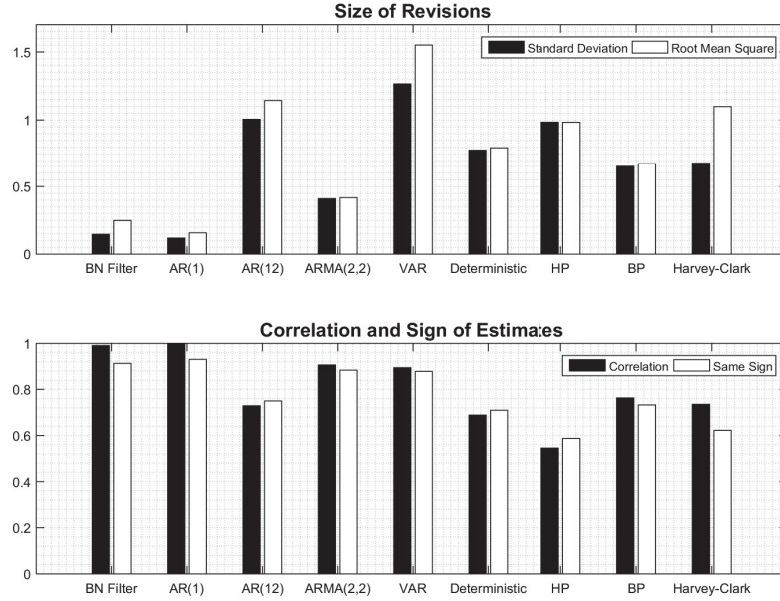
While eyeballing Figure 5 suggests the BN filter should be relatively appealing from a reliability perspective, we formally quantify these revision properties by calculating revision statistics, similar to the analysis in Orphanides and van Norden (2002), Edge and Rudd (2016), and Champagne et al. (2016). First, to quantify the size of the revisions, we consider two measures, the standard deviation and the root mean square (RMS), with the RMS measure designed to penalize a bias in revisions more heavily than the standard deviation measure. Both the standard deviation and RMS measures are normalized by the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap for each method to enable a fair comparison as the different methods produce estimates with very different amplitudes.²⁰ Second, we calculate the correlation between the pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap and the ex post estimate of the output gap. Third, we compute the frequency with which the pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap has the same sign as the ex post estimate. We consider the evaluation sample of 1970Q1-2012Q4 to match with the starting point for the out-of-sample forecast comparison discussed in the next section and because the more recent estimates near the end of the full sample in 2016Q2 may end up becoming more heavily revised in the future.

Figure 6 presents the revision statistics. As was visually apparent in Figure 5, the BN filter does well in terms of size of revisions, with both the standard deviation and RMS statistics being less than one quarter of the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap. The BN decompositions based on freely estimated AR(1) and ARMA(2,2) models also do reasonably well in terms of size of revisions, with the standard deviation and RMS statistics slightly better than the BN filter for the AR(1) model and somewhat worse for the ARMA(2,2) model. By contrast, the BN decompositions based on the highly parameterized AR(12) and VAR(4) models do quite poorly, with the standard deviation and RMS statistics about one standard de-

relatively imprecise. For deterministic detrending, the pseudo-real-time estimate always lies within what are very wide 95% confidence bands, with the cycle is significantly different than zero less than 5% of the time. Unlike with the model-based methods, we do not consider confidence bands for the HP and BP filters.

²⁰Note these statistics are referred to as “noise-to-signal ratios” by Orphanides and van Norden (2002). However, apart from the labelling, they have nothing to do with the signal-to-noise ratio in our proposed approach. Thus, we use the terms “standard deviation” and “RMS” of the revisions to avoid any confusion.

Figure 6: Revision statistics for U.S. output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. Standard deviation and root mean square of revisions to the pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap are normalized by the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Correlation” refers to the correlation between the pseudo-real-time estimate and the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Same sign” refers to the proportion of pseudo-real-time estimates that share the same sign as the ex post estimate of the output gap. The sample period for calculation of revision statistics is 1970Q1-2012Q4.

viation or more of the ex post estimates. Meanwhile, all of the other popular methods produce revisions that are well over half of one standard deviation of the ex post estimates, implying very large revisions in absolute terms given the relatively large amplitude of their output gap estimates. In terms of correlation of pseudo-real-time estimates with the ex post estimates, the BN decompositions tend to do well, although the correlation is somewhat lower for the more highly parameterized AR(12) and VAR(4) models. Notably, the BN filter and BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model have near perfect correlation between the pseudo-real-time and ex post estimates. The correlation for other popular methods is generally quite low, with the HP filter performing the worst. Finally turning our attention to whether the sign of the estimated output gap changes once one is endowed with future information, we find that, again, the BN decompositions tend to do relatively well, with the pseudo-real-time estimates for the BN filter and the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model performing best and correctly identifying the same sign as the final estimate about 90% of the time.

To summarize, the BN decomposition appears more reliable in a pseudo-real-time environment than other popular methods. This is because the consideration of future observations does not drastically alter the estimates of the forecasting model parameters. Even so, within the class of BN decompositions, model parameter parsimony seems to be important for reliability of the estimated output gap. This is not much of a surprise given that models which are highly parameterized, such as the AR(12) model or the VAR(4) model, will tend to feature parameter estimates that can be more unstable with the consideration of future observations. Our proposed approach of imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio on a high-order AR(p) model estimated via Bayesian methods with a shrinkage prior on second-difference coefficients produces what appears to be a very reliable pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap. Amongst the various methods that implicitly or explicitly impose a low signal-to-noise ratio, including the HP and BP filters, the BN filter performs by far the best. At the same time, the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model also performs very well in terms of revision properties, perhaps begging the question of why we impose a low signal-to-noise ratio. We discuss this issue next.

3 Is Our Approach Reasonable?

3.1 Justification for Imposing a Low Signal-to-Noise Ratio

To recap, we have proposed a BN filter that imposes a low signal-to-noise ratio when conducting the BN decomposition. When applied to U.S. log real GDP, the resulting output gap estimates are reliable in the Orphanides and van Norden (2002) sense of being subject to small revisions over time. The BN filter does better than other popular methods, except for the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model estimated via MLE, which does marginally better in terms of revisions, but corresponds to a much higher signal-to-noise ratio and is economically indistinguishable from zero throughout the sample.²¹

To the extent that one is agnostic about the true signal-to-noise ratio, there is not much reason to deviate from using the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model, especially if

²¹It is also statistically somewhat less distinguishable from zero in the sense that, as discussed in footnote 19, zero lies outside the 95% confidence band 30% of the time for the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model versus 40% of the time for the BN filter.

standard model selection and revision properties are the main criteria for choosing an approach to estimating the output gap. In other words, one can really only justify using the BN filter if there is a compelling reason to believe that a low signal-to-noise ratio really represents the true state of the world. Whether a low or high signal-to-noise ratio represents the true state of the world remains unresolved in the empirical literature. While considerable empirical research has found support for the presence of a volatile stochastic trend in U.S. log real GDP (e.g., Nelson and Plosser, 1982; Morley et al., 2003), this view has not gone unchallenged (e.g., Cochrane, 1994; Perron and Wada, 2009).

One reason to believe the signal-to-noise ratio is much lower than that given by a freely estimated AR model is that $\{\Delta y_t\}$ may behave more like an MA process with a near unit root than a finite-order autoregressive process. In this case, the true signal-to-noise ratio would be small and the process would have an infinite-order AR representation. However, a finite-order $AR(p)$ model would fail to capture the infinite-order AR dynamics and the estimated signal-to-noise ratio for such models could be biased upwards.

To demonstrate this possibility, we consider two empirically-plausible data generating processes (DGPs). In both cases, the observed time series is equal to a random walk with constant drift trend plus an $AR(2)$ cycle. Furthermore, in both cases, the first difference of the time series follows the exact same $ARMA(2,2)$ process with near unit MA root and a low signal-to-noise ratio of $\delta = 0.50$.

For the first DGP, we parameterize the Watson (1986) UC model of $\{y_t\}$ with uncorrelated components as estimated for U.S. real GDP by Morley et al. (2003). We choose this DGP because it corresponds to a low signal-to-noise ratio, unlike the unrestricted UC model in Morley et al. (2003) that allows for correlation between permanent and transitory movements.²² When considering model selection for possible ARMA specifications for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ given this DGP in finite samples, SIC will pick a low-order $AR(p)$ model with reasonably high frequency, even though the true model has an $ARMA(2,2)$ specification. Meanwhile, suppose there is some other observed variable $\{u_t\}$ that is related to the unobserved cycle $\{c_t\}$, but contains serially-

²²Morley et al. (2003) find that a zero correlation restriction can be rejected at the 5% level based on a likelihood ratio test. However, small values for the correlation cannot be rejected. Thus, we argue that this DGP is empirically plausible, if not necessarily probable in a Bayesian sense.

Table 1: Monte Carlo simulation for unobserved components process

	$T = 250$		$T = 500,000$	
	Correlation	Amplitude	Correlation	Amplitude
True Cycle		2.47		2.53
AR(1)	-0.12	0.51	-0.12	0.50
VAR(4)[$\Delta y_t, c_t$]	0.99	2.48	1.00	2.54
VAR(4)[$\Delta y_t, u_t$]	0.48	1.71	0.49	1.73
ARMA(2,2)	0.16	1.15	0.66	1.66
BN filter[$\delta = \bar{\delta}$]	0.49	1.27	0.59	1.97
BN filter[$\delta = 0.50$]	0.51	0.96	0.59	1.44
AR(12)	0.56	1.01	0.59	0.96

Notes: We consider the following DGP:

$$y_t = \tau_t + c_t$$

$$\tau_t = 0.81 + \tau_{t-1} + \eta_t,$$

$$c_t = 1.53c_{t-1} - 0.61c_{t-2} + \varepsilon_t,$$

$$u_t = -0.5c_t + v_t$$

$$v_t = 0.9v_{t-1} + \zeta_t,$$

where $\eta_t \sim iidN(0, 0.69^2)$, $\varepsilon_t \sim iidN(0, 0.62^2)$, $\zeta_t \sim iidN(0, 1)$, and η_t , ε_t , and ζ_t are mutually uncorrelated. $\delta = 0.50$ is the true value. “Correlation” refers to correlation between the true cycle and the estimated cycle. “Amplitude” is in terms of the standard deviation of percent deviation from trend. All estimated cycles are derived from BN decompositions for the respective models.

correlated “measurement error”. Tests for Granger causality will often suggest that $\{u_t\}$ has predictive power for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ beyond a low-order univariate $AR(p)$ process. Based on this, a researcher might consider a multivariate BN decomposition, as argued for by Cochrane (1994) in such a setting. For this DGP, we consider how well different cases of the BN decomposition would do in estimating the true cycle $\{c_t\}$.

Table 1 reports the results for the first DGP in a finite sample ($T=250$) and in population ($T=500,000$). The first thing to note is that the BN decomposition based on an $AR(1)$ model does poorly in estimating the true cycle, both in a finite sample and in population. The estimated cycle is negatively correlated with the true cycle and its amplitude (as measured by standard deviation) is only about 20% that of the true cycle. So this is exactly the example of a true state of the world in which the BN decomposition based on an $AR(1)$ model would be a bad approach to estimating the output gap, even though SIC might select a low-order AR model in a finite sample. Notably, when $T=250$ for this DGP, we find that SIC chooses a lag order for an $AR(p)$ model of $p=1$ more than 95% of the time.

The next thing to note is that a multivariate BN decomposition based on a $VAR(4)$ model of $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and the true cycle $\{c_t\}$ almost perfectly estimates the true cycle. This is not too

surprising given the inclusion of the true cycle in the forecasting model corresponds to a highly unrealistic scenario in which there exists an observed variable that perfectly captures economic slack. Indeed, if such a variable really did exist, there would be little reason to estimate the output gap in the first place rather than just monitoring the observed variable. Instead, a more realistic scenario is one in which there exists an observed variable that is related to economic slack but is also affected by persistent idiosyncratic factors (e.g., the unemployment rate). In order to capture such a scenario, we generate an artificial time series $\{u_t\}$ which is linked to the true cycle $\{c_t\}$ up to a persistent measurement error. When we estimate the cycle from a multivariate BN decomposition based on a VAR(4) model of $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and $\{u_t\}$, its correlation with the true cycle drops to around 0.5 and its amplitude is much less than that of the true cycle. These results hold in both a finite sample and in population.²³

A natural question is what role does model misspecification play in the results for the BN decomposition. To consider this, we conduct the BN decomposition based on an ARMA(2,2) model estimated via MLE. Despite the fact that the model is correctly specified, we can see that correlation between the estimated cycle and the true cycle is less than one and the amplitude is less than for the true cycle, even in population. This is similar to what was found in Morley (2011), where the BN decomposition based on the true model provided an unbiased estimator of the standard deviation of trend shocks for a UC process, but the estimate of the standard deviation of the cycle was downward biased. Indeed, as long as the true cycle is unobserved, there will generally be a bias in estimating its standard deviation using the BN cycle.²⁴ Meanwhile,

²³Furthermore, a researcher might not consider a multivariate BN decomposition in the first place given this DGP and a finite sample. In particular, when $T=250$, we find that a test of no Granger causality from $\{u_t\}$ to $\{\Delta y_t\}$ only rejects 30% of the time for a VAR(4) model. It should be noted, however, that this relatively low power reflects the relative magnitude of the measurement error in $\{u_t\}$, as the empirical rejection rate is effectively 100% for a test of no Granger causality from $\{c_t\}$ to $\{\Delta y_t\}$.

²⁴The BN decomposition based on a VAR(4) model of $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and the true cyclical component $\{c_t\}$ does not suffer from a downward bias because the cyclical component is observed and the true DGP has a (restricted) VAR(2) representation. Also, it is important to emphasize that a bias in the estimate of the standard deviation of the cycle is not the same as a bias in the estimate of the cycle. In particular, the BN cycle provides an unbiased estimator of the true cycle given the correct model specification. It is just that a property of the estimates – in this case their standard deviation – is different than the property of the true values. This is somewhat analogous to least squares residuals providing unbiased estimates of the true regression errors given the correct model, but the sample variance of the least squares residuals providing a downwardly biased estimate of the variance of the true errors. In general, it is always possible for optimal estimates to have different properties than the objects being estimated. An obvious and relevant example is filtered and smoothed inferences from the Kalman filter and smoother, which are both optimal subject to different information sets, but which have different properties in terms of their variability, as directly alluded to by their labels.

the finite sample results for the ARMA(2,2) model are much worse than the population results, with the correlation between the estimated cycle and the true cycle being close to zero. The relatively poor finite sample performance of the BN decomposition in this case likely reflects well-known difficulties with estimating ARMA parameters due to weak identification.

Turning to our proposed BN filter, we find that the estimated cycle shares the same relatively high correlation with the true cycle as a version of the BN decomposition that imposes the true signal-to-noise ratio (which, of course, is never known in practice) and the BN decomposition based on an AR(12) model. The AR(12) model does reasonably well given that it approximates the infinite-order AR representation of $\{\Delta y_t\}$. However, for this DGP, the BN decomposition based on the AR(12) model suffers from a larger downward bias in estimating the amplitude than our proposed approach. Indeed, the BN filter does even better in terms of amplitude than the BN decomposition imposing the true signal-to-noise ratio because it explicitly involves targeting $\bar{\delta}$ to maximize amplitude subject to a tradeoff with model fit.

Following Morley (2011), we also consider a second DGP for which the BN trend based on the true model defines the trend rather than just provides an estimate of an unobserved random walk trend component, as was the case with the first DGP. In particular, we consider a single-source-of-error process (see Anderson et al., 2006) that is parameterized to imply the same ARMA(2,2) process for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ as the first DGP. Thus, the same signal-to-noise ratio and all the same tendencies for SIC to pick a low-order AR model hold for this DGP. The only difference in a univariate context is a conceptual one about whether forecast errors represent true trend shocks (i.e., they are the “single source of error” in the process for $\{y_t\}$) or they are linear combinations of unobserved trend and cycle shocks, as was the case in the first DGP. See Morley (2011) for a full discussion of this conceptual distinction.

Table 2 reports the results for the second DGP and they are fairly similar to before, except that the BN decomposition generally does a better job estimating the amplitude of the true cycle. However, there are a few key results to highlight. First, the BN decomposition based on the ARMA(2,2) model still does poorly in terms of the correlation with true cycle in finite samples, despite being correctly specified. The point here is that the estimation problems for ARMA models remain massive even for sample sizes as large as $T=250$. Imposing a low signal-

Table 2: Monte Carlo simulation for single source of error process

	$T = 250$		$T = 500,000$	
	Correlation	Amplitude	Correlation	Amplitude
True Cycle		1.62		1.66
AR(1)	-0.17	0.51	-0.18	0.50
VAR(4)[$\Delta y_t, c_t$]	0.98	1.68	1.00	1.65
VAR(4)[$\Delta y_t, u_t$]	0.26	1.11	0.34	0.90
ARMA(2,2)	0.19	1.16	1.00	1.63
BN filter[$\delta = \bar{\delta}$]	0.73	1.27	0.89	1.96
BN filter[$\delta = 0.50$]	0.76	0.96	0.90	1.43
AR(12)	0.82	1.02	0.89	0.97

Notes: We consider the following DGP:

$$y_t = \tau_t + c_t$$

$$\tau_t = 0.81 + \tau_{t-1} + \eta_t,$$

$$c_t = 1.53c_{t-1} - 0.61c_{t-2} + 0.42\eta_t - 0.18\eta_{t-1}$$

$$u_t = -0.5c_t + v_t$$

$$v_t = 0.9v_{t-1} + \zeta_t,$$

$\eta_t \sim iidN(0, 0.69^2)$, $\zeta_t \sim iidN(0, 1)$, and η_t and ζ_t are mutually uncorrelated. “Correlation” refers to correlation between the true cycle and the estimated cycle. $\delta = 0.50$ is the true value. “Amplitude” is in terms of the standard deviation of percent deviation from trend. All estimated cycles are derived from BN decompositions for the respective models.

to-noise ratio for an AR model appears to be a more effective way at getting at the true cycle than estimating the true model when estimation involves weak identification issues. Second, the BN decomposition based on a VAR(4) model of $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and $\{u_t\}$ does worse than for the first DGP, suggesting that measurement error in an observed measure of economic slack offsets the benefits of having a forecast error represent the true trend shock. Again, imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio appears to be a more straightforward and effective way to get the estimated cycle closer to the true cycle than adding multivariate information, even if the multivariate information also decreases the signal-to-noise ratio, as discussed in Evans and Reichlin (1994). Determining the appropriate multivariate information is also a difficult econometric problem in itself, with finite-sample power issues and, at the same time, considerable danger of overfitting unless variable selection is handled carefully.²⁵ Meanwhile, even given the correct multivariate information, the practical issue of measurement error that effectively motivates the need to estimate the cyclical component in the first place means that a multivariate BN decomposition will suffer even in population. Third, although the BN decomposition based on an AR(12)

²⁵Interestingly, the finite-sample power of the Granger causality tests for $\{u_t\}$ to $\{\Delta y_t\}$ and $\{c_t\}$ to $\{\Delta y_t\}$ is lower for this DGP than the first one. In particular, when $T=250$, the respective empirical rejection rates for a VAR(4) model are only 8% and 51% compared to 30% and 100% for the first DGP. Thus, a researcher who only considered $\{u_t\}$ or $\{c_t\}$ as a possible predictive variable would be even less likely to consider a multivariate BN decomposition if this DGP represented the true state of the world.

model estimated via MLE does relatively well, especially for this DGP, we know from the analysis in the previous section that, like the BN decomposition based on a VAR model, it suffers from larger revisions than our proposed approach.

The bottom line is that it is possible to think of a true state of the world in which standard model selection criteria and hypothesis testing would push a researcher towards an AR(1) model (based on parsimony), an ARMA(2,2) model (as estimation and testing eventually discovers the true model given enough data), or possibly a VAR model (based Granger causality tests), but the BN decomposition based on these models would do much worse at capturing the true cycle than our proposed approach. Although the ARMA(2,2) model is the correct specification, the BN decomposition for this model suffers in finite samples due to known estimation problems for such models. The BN decomposition for the AR(1) model performs poorly in large samples, as does the VAR(4) model when the multivariate information is measured with error. Meanwhile, even though the BN decomposition based on an AR(12) model does reasonably well, as would a VAR(4) model when the multivariate information is measured accurately, these versions of the BN decomposition still suffer from reliability issues. By contrast, the BN filter works well even in finite samples and is reliable in terms of its revision properties.

Next, we consider whether the BN filter is also reliable in the sense of minimizing a spurious cycle that is unrelated to future output growth or other macroeconomic variables. Although we might worry about model selection criteria and hypothesis testing pushing us to consider models that lead to poor estimates of the output gap, we should at the same time worry that imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio could produce a spurious cycle if the true state of the world for U.S. real GDP growth is more along the lines of an AR(1) model than the two DGPs considered above. In particular, if the BN filter produces a large spurious cycle, then our estimated output gap should not perform as well as the BN decomposition based on a freely estimated AR(1) model in forecasting output growth and inflation out of sample. We check whether this is the case in practice.

3.2 Out-of-Sample Forecast Comparisons

In this subsection, we evaluate different trend-cycle decomposition methods in terms of the ability of their pseudo-real-time output gap estimates to forecast future U.S. output growth and inflation. Our forecast evaluation sample starts in 1970Q1. We use an expanding window for estimation. The first estimate of an output gap we have is for 1947Q2. We use the full extent of the data sample for forecast evaluation after adjusting for the maximum number of lags in the forecasting equation.

U.S. Output Growth Forecasts Nelson (2008) argues for using forecasts of future output growth as a way to evaluate competing estimates of the output gap. The underlying intuition is that if an estimated output gap suggests output is below trend, this should imply faster output growth at some point in the future when output adjusts towards the trend to close the gap. Conversely, if output is above trend, one should forecast slower output growth at some horizon for output to return back towards the trend. The point is that the true cycle will cross its unconditional mean of zero at some point, and a good estimate of the output gap should be able to forecast the effects of this reversion to mean. For an h -period-ahead output growth forecast, we consider a forecasting equation similar to Nelson (2008):

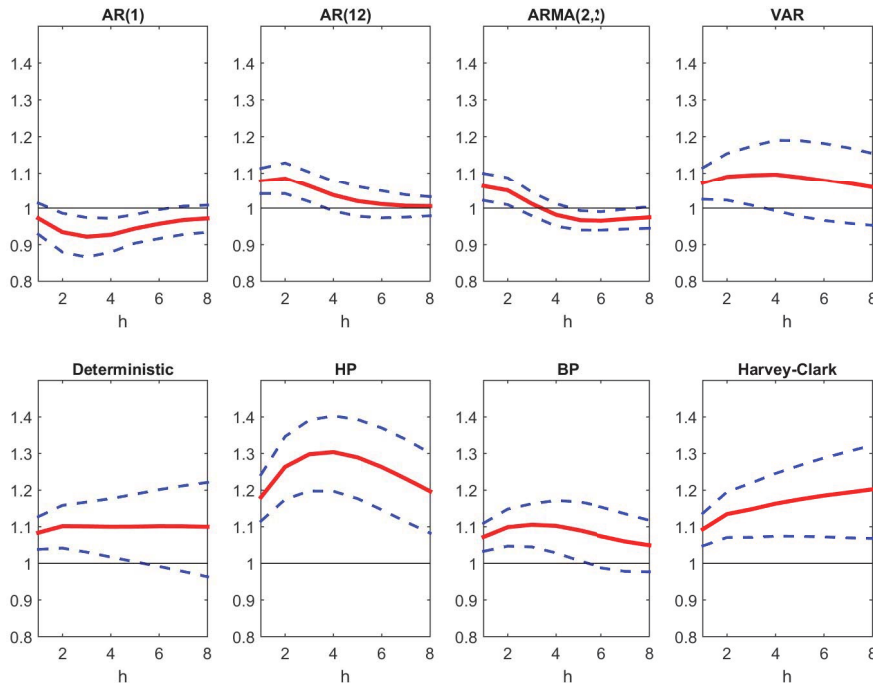
$$y_{t+h} - y_t = \alpha + \beta \hat{c}_t + \varepsilon_{t+h,t} \quad (7)$$

where y is the natural log of real GDP, $\hat{c}$ is the estimated output gap, ε is a forecast error, and α and β are coefficients estimated using least squares. Therefore, for an accurate estimate of the output gap, we expect $\beta < 0$ at some horizon h and the inclusion of the estimated output gap in the forecast equation to help predict h -period-ahead output growth.

Figure 7 presents the out-of-sample forecasting results. The Relative Root Mean Squared Errors (RRMSEs) are in comparison to forecasts using the BN filter estimate of the output gap. The figure includes 90% confidence bands obtained by inverting the Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal predictive accuracy.

We make two observations about the forecasting results. First, the output gap estimates constructed using the BN decomposition do better at all horizons than those based on other

Figure 7: Out-of-sample U.S. output growth forecast comparison relative to the BN filter benchmark using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter estimated output gap. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

methods, including the HP and BP filters. This further vindicates our choice to work with a BN decomposition. Second, within the class of BN decompositions, similar to with the revision statistics, parsimony or shrinkage priors seem to be key. In particular, the BN decomposition based on AR(12), ARMA(2,2), and VAR(4) models do worse than the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model or the BN filter. Therefore, the results for forecasting output growth mimic many of the results we had for the revisions statistics. Notably, despite imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio, the BN filter appears to avoid producing much of a spurious cycle that would diminish the forecasting performance of its output gap estimate out of sample. It is true that the estimated output gap from the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model does slightly better at short horizons. But this could be due to momentum in output growth initially following a transitory shock. In particular, the BN cycle for an AR(1) model is proportional to output growth, so its strong forecast performance could just be capturing positive serial correlation at

short horizons rather than an ability to capture reversion to trend. Notably the RRMSE is close to one and is not significant at longer horizons, suggesting that an AR model does no better than the BN filter at longer horizons. So, unlike other methods that produce intuitive estimates of the output gap by imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio, our approach does not seem to produce a spurious cycle in the sense of having less of a link to future output growth at longer horizons than a basic AR(1) model.

U.S. Inflation Forecasts We also consider a Phillips Curve type inflation forecasting equation to evaluate competing estimates of the output gap. Similar to, amongst others, Stock and Watson (1999, 2008) and Clark and McCracken (2006), we use a fairly standard specification from the inflation forecasting literature. In particular, we specify the following autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) representation for our pseudo-real-time h -period-ahead Phillips Curve inflation forecast:

$$\pi_{t+h} - \pi_t = \gamma + \sum_{i=0}^p \theta_i \triangle \pi_{t-i} + \sum_{i=0}^q \kappa_i \hat{c}_{t-i} + \varepsilon_{t+h,t}. \quad (8)$$

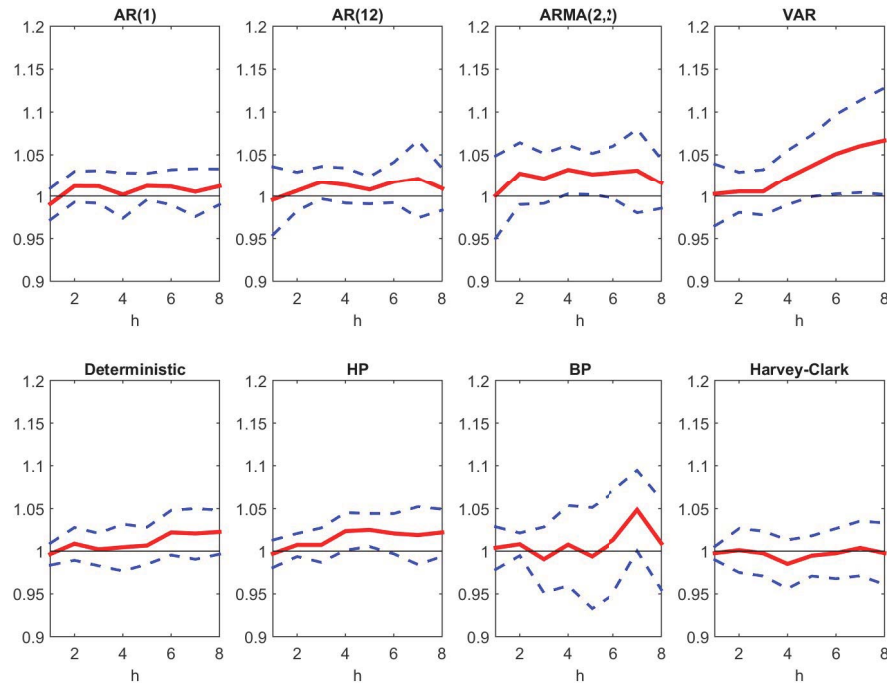
where π is U.S. CPI inflation.²⁶ We choose the lag orders of the forecasting equation, namely p and q above, using the SIC. As is commonly done (see, for example, Stock and Watson, 1999, 2008; Clark and McCracken, 2006), we apply the information criterion to the entire sample and run the pseudo-real-time analysis using the same number of lags, implicitly assuming we know the optimal lag order *a priori*. The set of lag orders we consider for our ADL forecasting equation are $p \in [0, 12]$ and $q \in [0, 12]$.

Figure 8 presents the out-of-sample forecasting results for the U.S inflation. Once again, as with the results for output growth, we compute 90% confidence intervals by inverting the Diebold and Mariano (1995) test.

As in the case of forecasting output growth, the BN filter estimate of the output gap does relatively well. In particular, imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio outperforms all other BN decompositions, although generally not significantly so. The BN filter also generally does better

²⁶The raw monthly data for the U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) for all urban consumers (seasonally adjusted) are again taken from FRED and are converted to the quarterly frequency for 1947Q1 to 2016Q2 by simple averaging.

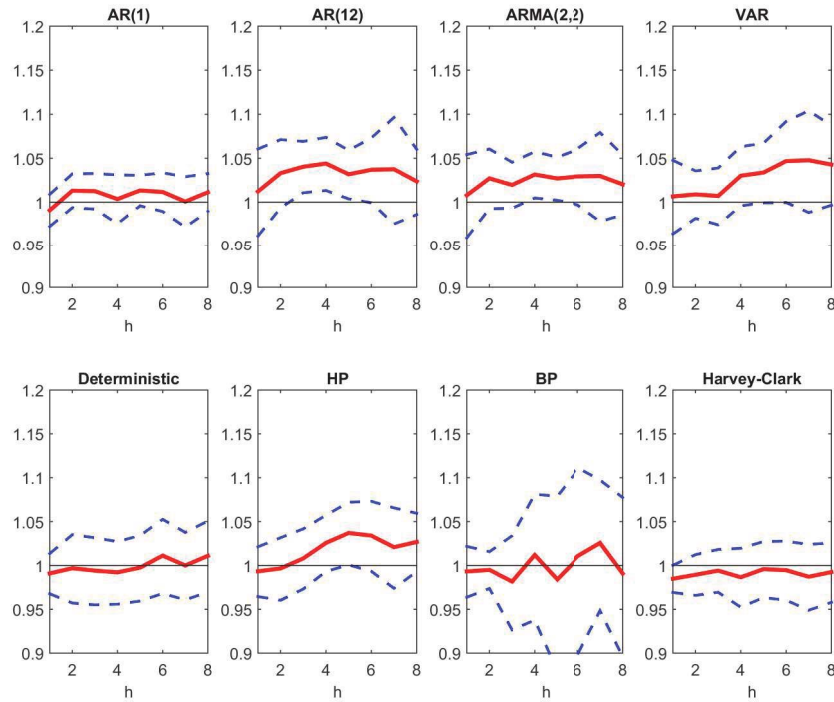
Figure 8: Out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparison relative to the BN filter benchmark using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter estimated output gap. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

than the HP filter, BP filter, and deterministic detrending, although again not significantly so. In contrast to the results for forecasting output growth, the differences in inflation forecast performance using the different output gap estimates are fairly small, with most RRMSEs within the 1.00 to 1.05 range, indicating the gains in changing the output gap estimates for forecasting inflation can be marginal at best and are generally not significant. To some extent, these results are not entirely surprising. Atkeson and Ohanian (2001) and Stock and Watson (2008) show that real-activity based Phillips Curve type forecasts may not be particularly useful for forecasting inflation. In some sense, then, our results are simply a manifestation of what is commonly found in the inflation forecasting literature. However, we note that our proposed approach is still competitive and may be slightly better than other methods in terms of providing a good real-time measure of economic slack as it pertains to inflation. In particular, the BN filter estimate of the output gap produces statistically significantly better inflation forecasts at

Figure 9: Pseudo-out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparison relative to the BN filter benchmark using revised output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot pseudo-out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter estimated output gap. Forecast evaluation begins in 1970Q1, but is only a pseudo-out-of-sample evaluation given the use of revised output gap estimates. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

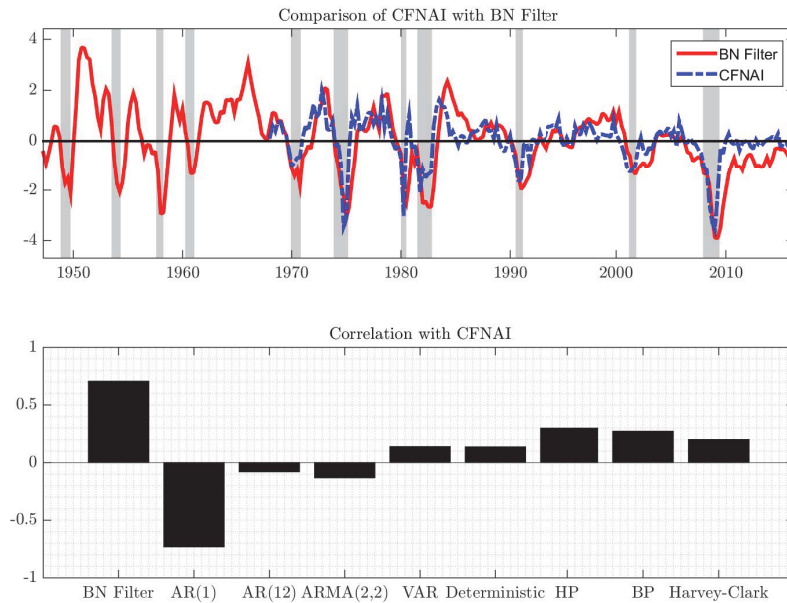
some horizons relative to approaches such as the HP filter and deterministic detrending. It is also noteworthy that none of the alternative methods outperform our proposed approach in a statistically significant way.

3.3 Are Large Revisions Useful for Understanding the Past?

In this subsection, we discuss whether heavily revised output gap estimates, although less useful for current analysis in real time, provide a better ex post understanding and interpretation of past economic activity. Without ever knowing the true output gap, it can be a challenge to evaluate the historical accuracy of output gap estimates. However, we attempt to address historical accuracy in three ways.

First, we consider the ability of revised estimates to predict future inflation. Figure 9

Figure 10: Relationship of U.S. output gap estimates with Chicago Fed's National Activity Index



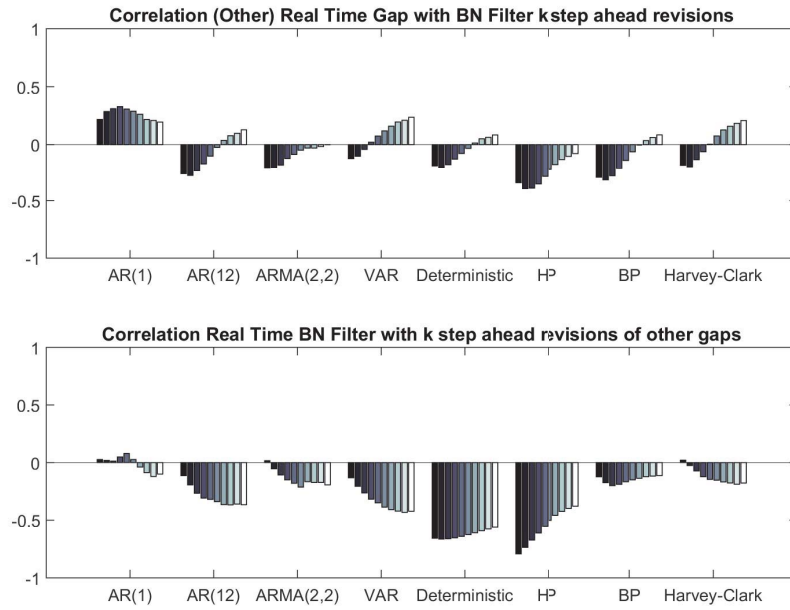
Notes: Units in top panel are 100 times natural log deviation from trend for the ex post estimated output gap for BN filter and reported index units for the Chicago Fed's National Activity Index (CFNAI). Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates. See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. Ex post estimates are used in the calculation of correlations.

presents a pseudo-out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparison using revised output gap estimates instead of real-time estimates. Notably, we find only small differences in the forecasting results, with the relative performance of heavily-revised approaches often deteriorating in comparison to using the pseudo-real-time estimates.²⁷ Thus, the large revisions for deterministic detrending, the HP filter, the BP filter, and the Harvey-Clark model are clearly not providing any additional insights into the historical values of the output gap that are relevant for inflation.

Second, we consider the relationship of the various revised estimates of the output gap with an alternative measure of U.S. economic activity that is constructed in a completely different way, namely the Chicago Fed's National Activity Index (CFNAI). The CFNAI is an index of activity based on 85 data series and Berge and Jordà (2011) find it provides particularly ac-

²⁷We do not report a similar exercise for predicting future output growth because the revised estimates for deterministic detrending, the HP filter, the BP filter, and the Harvey-Clark model will directly reflect future output growth. So it would be of little surprise, but not economically meaningful, that they would predict future output growth better than pseudo-real-time estimates. We thank Adrian Pagan for pointing this out.

Figure 11: Relationship between pseudo-real-time estimates of the U.S. output gap and subsequent revisions across methods



Notes: See notes for Figure 5 for descriptions of labels of methods. The top panel presents the correlation of the k -step-ahead revision for the BN filter with the pseudo-real-time output gap estimate for each of the other methods. The bottom panel presents the correlation of the k -step-ahead revision for each of the other methods with the pseudo-real-time estimate for the BN filter. Each of the 10 bars indicates $k = 1$ to $k=10$ step ahead reading off $k = 1$ from the leftmost to $k=10$ to the rightmost.

curate signals about the current state of the business cycle as determined by the retrospective evaluation of the NBER. The top panel of Figure 10 plots the revised CFNAI and the revised estimate for the BN filter. Despite our proposed approach being based only on the U.S. quarterly real GDP data series, it displays a remarkable similarity to the CFNAI, including in the correspondence of its movements with the NBER reference cycle. Meanwhile, the bottom panel presents correlations between the CFNAI and the various revised estimates of the output gap for different methods. The correlations confirm a strong positive relationship between the CFNAI and the estimate based on the BN filter, with much weaker and sometimes even negative relationships for the other estimates.

Third, we consider whether future k -step ahead revisions of the output gap from alternative methods are correlated with the pseudo-real-time BN filter output gap and vice versa. The premise of this exercise is that, if the pseudo-real-time output gap from the BN filter is highly

correlated with the true output gap, while other methods are less accurate but adjust towards the true output gap with their revisions, then the revisions should be correlated with the pseudo-real-time output gap from the BN filter. We also do the exercise in reverse as the same logic holds in the other direction. If revisions for the BN filter are correlated with the pseudo-real-time estimates for other methods, then this suggests the other estimates are more accurate. The results of this exercise are presented in Figure 11. We present correlations for $k = 1$ to 10 steps ahead. As the top panel reveals, the correlation of the k -step ahead revision of the BN filter never exceeds ± 0.4 with any of the other pseudo-real-time estimates, suggesting that the relatively small revisions for BN filter could not have been easily predicted by the pseudo-real-time estimates for the other methods. By contrast, in the bottom panel, the large negative correlations suggest that the other methods initially overestimate movements in the output gap relative to the BN filter, but adjust back towards the BN filter estimate with revisions.

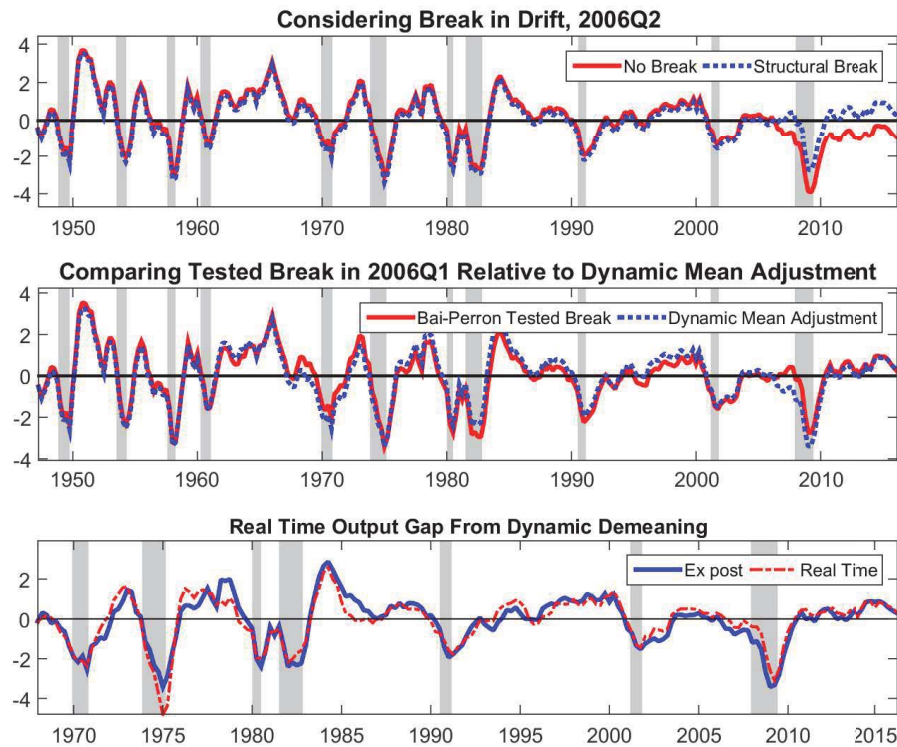
Overall, our analysis suggests that the large revisions for other trend-cycle decomposition methods are not capturing much about the true output gap that is not already captured by the BN filter. Also, our results suggest that our approach provides a convenient way to measure economic slack in that it appears to provide a shortcut to a large-scale multivariate approach that would also lead to a lower signal-to-noise ratio, while avoiding the overfitting and instability issues that inevitably arise with such multivariate analysis.

4 Extensions

4.1 Accounting for Structural Breaks

The traditional BN decomposition assumes that the trend component of $\{y_t\}$ follows a random walk with constant drift. One potential concern then is, if there has been a sufficiently large change in the long-run growth rate, the assumption of constant drift will lead to biased estimates of the output gap. For example, if there is a large reduction in the long-run growth rate, a forecasting model that fails to account for it will keep anticipating faster growth than actually occurs after the break, leading to a persistently negative estimate of the output gap from the BN decomposition. More generally, Perron and Wada (2009, 2016) argue that estimates of

Figure 12: U.S. output gap estimates from the BN filter when allowing for structural breaks



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The top panel compares the BN filter estimated output gap in Figure 3 to a BN filter estimated output gap allowing for a break in long-run growth in 2006Q2 found using the Bai and Perron (2003) test. The middle panel compares the BN filter estimated output gap allowing for a break in long-run growth in 2006Q2 to a BN filter estimated output gap when dynamically demeaning the data relative to a backward looking rolling 40 quarter average. The bottom panel compares the ex post and pseudo-real-time BN filter estimates of the output gap when dynamically demeaning the data. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

the output gap from different methods can be highly dependent on accounting for structural breaks. Therefore, we consider the effect of structural breaks on our estimates and propose a modification of the BN filter to address their possible presence.

When we test for breaks in the long-run growth rate for U.S. real GDP using Bai and Perron (2003) procedures, we find one break in 2006Q1.²⁸ We therefore adjust the data for the break in the long-run growth rate in 2006Q1 and apply the BN filter to the adjusted data. The estimated

²⁸We use 15% trimming of the sample between potential breaks. One concern is that a possible break has occurred since the Great Recession, a period which falls within the 15% trimming window at the end of the sample. However, when we reduce the trimming window to 5% or 10%, we still find evidence of only one break in 2006Q1.

output gap allowing for a break in 2006Q1 is shown in the top panel of Figure 12.²⁹ Because we adjust for a slowdown in the long-run growth rate, the estimated output gap turns positive around 2010 and remains slightly positive from then on. An interesting finding is that the estimated output gap prior to the break is virtually identical to the benchmark results when not allowing for a break.

There are two practical issue to deal with when considering structural breaks. First, it would be difficult to detect breaks in real time. Our empirical example suggests that one can date a possible break in 2006Q1, but this is only with hindsight given an addition of 10 extra years of data.³⁰ Therefore, allowing for breaks as done above with a Bai and Perron (2003) test is ultimately an ex post exercise that requires a long span of data. Second, even though we can allow for breaks ex post, there can remain a concern that break date estimates are not particularly robust. For example, when we use data up to 2016Q2, the break date is estimated at 2006Q1, but using data up to 2016Q1, the break date is estimated at 2000Q2.

To help address these practical issues, we propose a slight modification to the BN filter to guard against possible structural breaks in the long-run growth rate in real time, while still being robust to different possible break dates. In particular, instead of testing for breaks using Bai and Perron (2003) procedures and adjusting the data to their regime specific mean, we propose dynamically demeaning the data using a backward-looking rolling 40-quarter average growth rate.³¹ That is, we construct deviations from mean as follows:

$$\Delta\tilde{y}_t = \Delta y_t - \frac{1}{40} \sum_{i=0}^{39} \Delta y_{t-i}.$$

We then apply the BN filter using $X_t = (\Delta\tilde{y}_t, \Delta\tilde{y}_{t-1}, \dots, \Delta\tilde{y}_{t-p+1})'$ in equation (3) for the dynamically demeaned data. This procedure loses some precision in the estimate of the mean compared to knowing the exact break date. But it is robust to multiple or gradual breaks and it

²⁹If there were evidence of a structural break in the persistence of U.S. real GDP growth, it might motivate consideration of a break in the imposed signal-to-noise ratio given the link between δ and $\phi(1)$ for an $AR(p)$ model. However, we find no evidence for a break in persistence and assume a constant $\bar{\delta}$ for the whole sample.

³⁰Andrews (2003) proposes a generalized test for a structural break that is applicable at the end of a sample. However, not surprisingly, such tests have somewhat limited power unless the magnitude of the break in mean is very large relative to the error variance.

³¹One potential issue is what to choose as the appropriate window for estimating a changing long-run growth rate. We consider 40 quarters to smooth over the effects of most business cycle fluctuations on average growth.

can be easily applied in real time.³²

In the middle panel of Figure 12, we plot the estimated output gap given dynamic mean adjustment and compare it to the results when allowing for a break in 2006Q1. As can be seen, the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment does quite well at approximating the BN filter output gap estimate when allowing for a break detected by Bai and Perron (2003) procedures.³³ Meanwhile, in the bottom panel of Figure 12, we compare pseudo-real-time and ex post estimates of the output gap using dynamic mean adjustment. Encouragingly, the pseudo-real-time estimates appear reasonably reliable in terms of their revision properties.

4.2 Application to Other Data Series

We apply the BN filter to log real GDP and unemployment rate data for the G7, Australia, and New Zealand in order to estimate both output and unemployment gaps.³⁴ Figure 13 plots the estimated gaps, reporting the signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio for the output gap and the implied Okun's Law coefficient that estimates the percentage change in the output gap per percentage point change in the unemployment gap. All of output growth rates, except for the U.S. data, are adjusted for breaks in the long-run growth rate found by Bai and Perron (2003) procedures. The negative of the unemployment gap is plotted to enhance the visual comparison with the output gap.

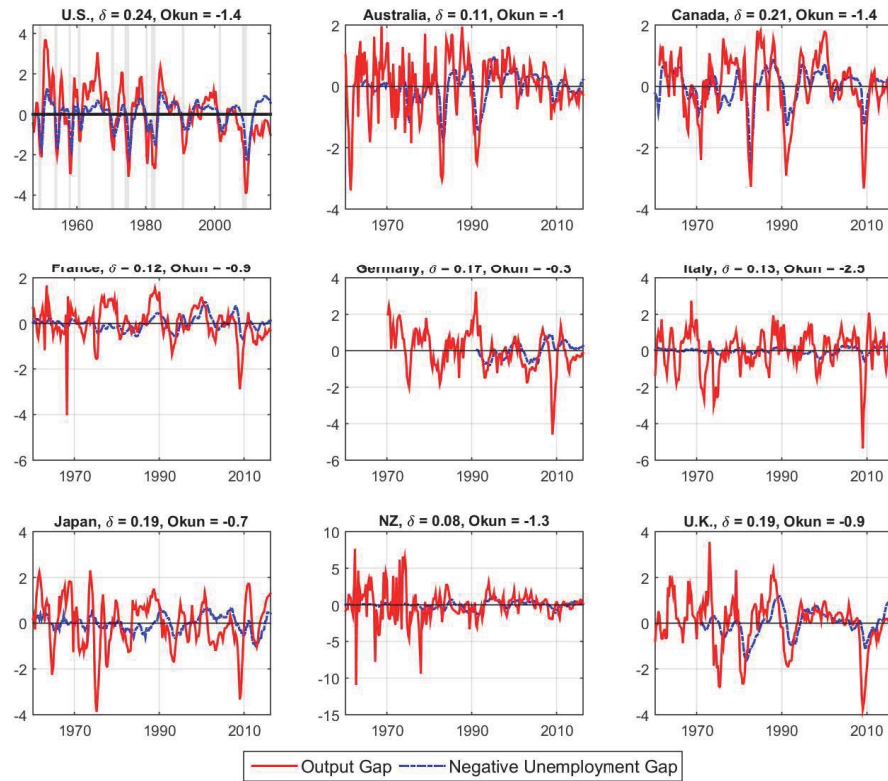
For the U.S. data, the estimated unemployment gap is highly (negatively) correlated with estimated output gap. When we regress the output gap against the unemployment gap, we obtain a coefficient of -1.4, which is slight lower than the consensus estimate of Okun's Law, but in agreement with a comparable analysis by Sinclair (2009), who estimates output and unemployment gaps in a multivariate UC model. For the other countries, the δ that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio is comparable to $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ for the U.S. data, but generally a bit smaller, ranging from as low as 0.08 for New Zealand to 0.21 for Canada. As with the U.S.

³²For the first 40 quarters of the sample, we use the average growth rate for that 10 year period. However, by the start of our calculation of pseudo-real-time estimates in 1968Q1, the estimate of the mean is completely backward looking.

³³In the online appendix, we show that the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment is still comparatively reliable in terms of its revision properties and out-of-sample forecast performance. We also show that dynamic mean adjustment also does quite well at approximating results when allowing for breaks detected from Bai and Perron (2003) procedures for the non-U.S. G7 countries, Australia, and New Zealand.

³⁴The data are sourced from the IMF Outlook.

Figure 13: Output and unemployment gap estimates from the BN filter for the G7, Australia, and New Zealand



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The estimated output gap is from the BN filter and δ is the corresponding signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. The estimated unemployment gap is from the BN filter and “Okun” refers to slope of Okun’s law coefficient implying the percentage point change in the output gap per percentage point change in the unemployment gap. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

data, there is a clear negative relationship between the estimated output and unemployment gaps for the other countries. The Okun’s Law coefficient ranges from -0.3 for Germany to -2.5 for Italy. In some cases, such as for Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the negative correlation between the estimated output and unemployment gaps is visually quite clear in Figure 13, while in other cases, such as for Italy and Japan, it is less so, perhaps reflecting the varying degrees of labour market rigidities across countries.

Overall, the main conclusion from these results for other data series is that the BN filter is able to produce intuitive estimates of output and unemployment gaps not just for the United States, but for other countries as well.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed a modification of the BN decomposition to directly impose a low signal-to-noise ratio. In particular, rather than focusing solely on model fit by freely estimating a time series forecasting model, we develop a “BN filter” that trades off amplitude and model fit by maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio in order to determine a low signal-to-noise ratio to impose in Bayesian estimation of a univariate AR model. When applied to postwar U.S. quarterly log real GDP, the BN filter produces estimates of the output gap that are both intuitive and reliable, while estimates for other methods are, at best, either intuitive or reliable, but never both at the same time. Notably, the BN filter retains the apparent reliability of the traditional BN decomposition based on freely estimated AR models, but the estimated output gap is much more intuitive in the sense of being relatively large in amplitude, persistent, and moving closely with the NBER reference cycle. Other methods that produce similarly intuitive estimates of the output gap are far less reliable in terms of their revision properties.

We motivate why it can be useful to impose a low signal-to-noise ratio. In particular, if the true state of the world is one in which there is an unobserved output gap that is large in amplitude and persistent, other methods tend to produce highly misleading estimates of the output gap in finite samples. By contrast, the BN filter performs relatively well in terms of correlation with the true output gap. At the same time, despite imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio, our proposed approach also appears reliable in the sense of not generating a large spurious cycle when applied to U.S. log real GDP. Specifically, the estimated output gap from the BN filter forecasts U.S. output growth and inflation similarly to estimated output gap from the BN decomposition based on a freely estimated AR(1) model and better than for other methods, especially those that also impose a low signal-to-noise ratio. The revised estimate from the BN filter also appears to be more accurate than more heavily-revised output gap estimates in terms of its relationships with inflation and a well-known revised measure of U.S. economic activity, the Chicago Fed’s National Activity Index, that is constructed using a large number of economic variables. Furthermore, the real-time estimates from the BN filter are more (typically negatively) correlated with future revisions in other estimates than other real-time estimates are correlated with future revisions in the estimate from the BN filter.

Finally, we show how to account for potential structural breaks in long-run growth rates when using the BN filter and we apply our approach to real GDP and unemployment rate data for the United States and other countries, producing intuitive estimates of output gaps that have strong Okun’s Law relationships with estimated unemployment gaps.

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Online Appendix to “*Intuitive and Reliable
Estimates of the Output Gap from a
Beveridge-Nelson Filter*”*

Günes Kamber^{1,2,4}, James Morley^{3,4}, and Benjamin Wong^{1,4}

¹Reserve Bank of New Zealand

²Bank for International Settlements

³University of New South Wales

⁴Centre for Applied Macroeconomic Analysis, The Australian National
University

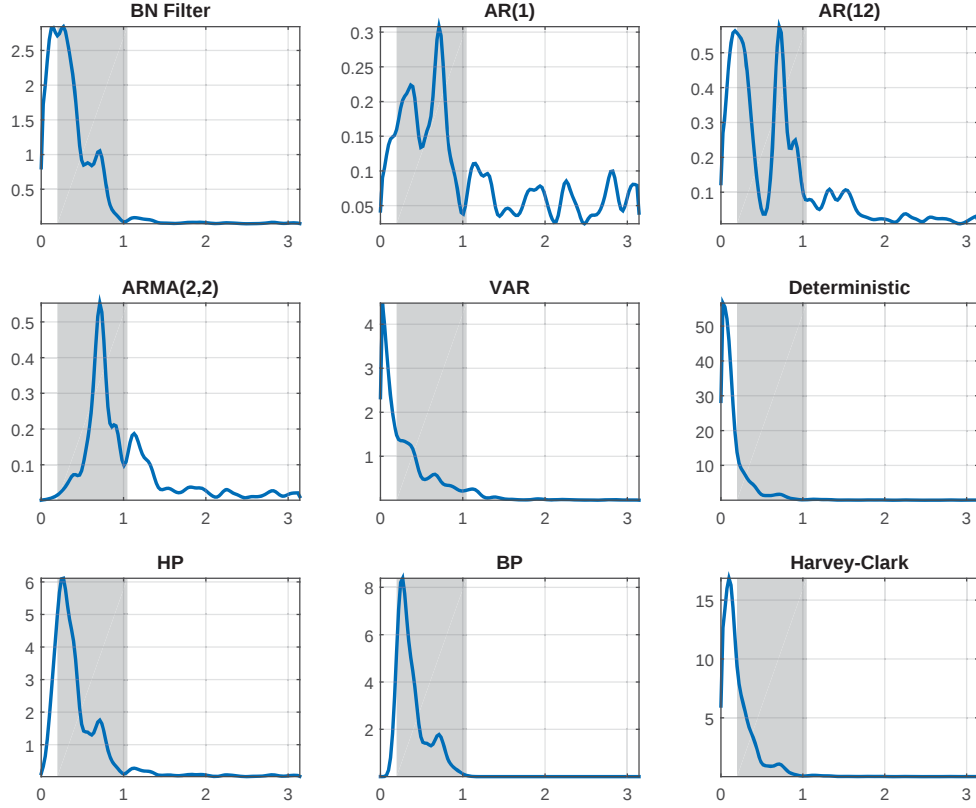
*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand or the Bank for International Settlements. Kamber: gunes.kamber@bis.org Morley: james.morley@unsw.edu.au Wong: benjamin.wong@rbnz.govt.nz

A1 Sample Periodograms

Figure A1 plots the sample periodograms for the various ex post estimates of the U.S. output gap displayed in Figure 5 of the main text.¹ It is clear from the sample periodograms that the estimated output gap from the BN filter highlights frequencies that are similar to those highlighted by the HP and BP filters. The BN decompositions based on AR(1), AR(12), and ARMA(2,2) models appear to highlight higher frequencies (i.e., those with periods of less than 6 quarters), while the BN decomposition based on the VAR model, the deterministic detrending, and the Harvey-Clark UC model appear to highlight lower frequencies (i.e., those with periods greater than 32 quarters). Because the HP and BP filters are designed to highlight movements at business cycle frequencies, the similarity of the highlighted frequencies for the BN filter with those for the HP and BP filters suggest the BN filter is successful at capturing transitory movements in log real GDP at business cycle frequencies.

¹For our calculations, we use the default periodogram function in Matlab.

Figure A1: Sample periodograms for estimated U.S. output gaps



Notes: y -axis units are spectral power and x -axis units are frequency. Shaded bars correspond to frequencies with periods between 6 and 32 quarters. “BN filter” refers to our proposed approach of estimating the output gap using the BN decomposition based on Bayesian estimation of an $AR(12)$ model of U.S. quarterly real GDP growth with shrinkage priors on second-difference coefficients and imposing the signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. “ $AR(1)$ ”, “ $AR(12)$ ”, and “ $ARMA(2,2)$ ” refer to BN decompositions based on the respective models estimated via MLE. “VAR” refers to the BN decomposition based on a $VAR(4)$ model of output growth and the unemployment rate estimated via MLE. “Deterministic” refers to detrending based on least squares regression on a quadratic time trend. “HP” refers to the Hodrick and Prescott (1997) filter. “BP” refers to the bandpass filter of Christiano and Fitzgerald (2003). “Harvey-Clark” refers to the UC model as described by Harvey (1985) and Clark (1987).

A2 Asymptotic Bias from Maximizing the Amplitude-to-Noise Ratio

We consider Monte Carlo simulation to investigate the asymptotic bias induced by selecting the signal-to-noise ratio based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio rather than freely estimating the signal-to-noise ratio. To do this, we consider the value of $\bar{\delta}$ chosen by our automatic selection procedure given $T=500,000$. By looking at such a large sample size, we are able to see whether our procedure really corresponds to a “dogmatic” prior in the sense of $\bar{\delta}$ being inconsistent for the true δ . We also isolate the impact of our procedure from any small sample biases that could occur in freely estimating the signal-to-noise ratio.

For our DGP, we use an AR(2) process:

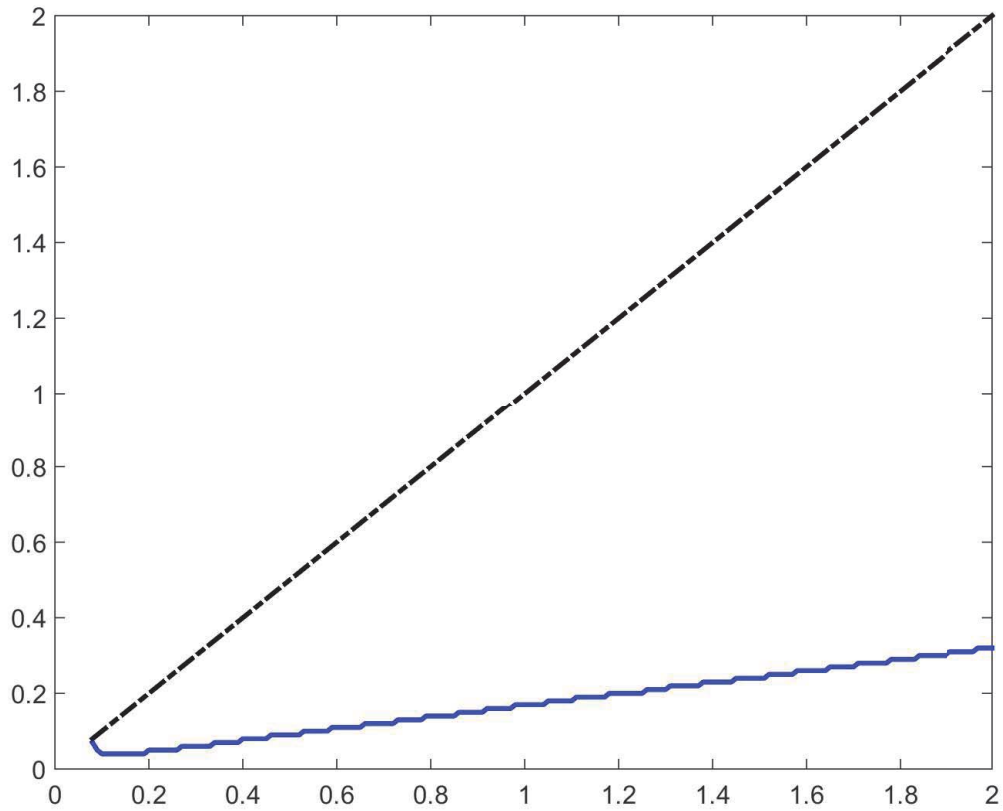
$$\Delta\tilde{y}_t = \rho\Delta\tilde{y}_{t-1} + \phi^*\Delta^2\tilde{y}_{t-1} + e_t, \quad (\text{A.1})$$

where $e_t \sim iidN(0,1)$. An AR(2) process allows us to consider low values for the true signal-to-noise ratio δ . In particular, we fix $\phi^* = 0.8$ and adjust the value of ρ such that the true signal-to-noise ratio δ varies between 0.08 (the lowest value associated with a stationary process) and 2.00 in increments of 0.01. For each true δ , we simulate a time series with 500,000 observations and apply the BN filter to the simulated time series. This produces a corresponding $\bar{\delta}$ based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio.

Figure A2 plots the resulting $\bar{\delta}$ against the true δ for each simulation. The $\bar{\delta}$ chosen by our procedure is always below the 45 degree line, corresponding to a downward asymptotic bias in calculating the signal-to-noise ratio when selecting it based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio. The lack of consistency of our procedure in calculating the signal-to-noise ratio is what leads us to think of the BN filter as imposing a dogmatic prior. However, it is notable that this bias gets smaller as the true signal-to-noise ratio gets smaller and almost disappears when the true $\delta = 0.08$, which is very close to the boundary of the stationarity region for this AR(2) DGP with $\phi^* = 0.8$.² Thus, our approach to imposing a low signal-to-noise ratio can be reasonable when the true signal-to-noise ratio is low. Related, the Monte Carlo results in Section 3.1 of the main text suggest that, even when the AR(12) model used in the BN filter is misspecified, the downward asymptotic bias in calculating $\bar{\delta}$ is not too severe for a moderately low value of $\delta = 0.50$ and still leads to comparatively accurate inferences about the true cycle.

²We find that the result of almost no asymptotic bias when the true δ is very close to the the boundary of the stationarity region for the DGP is robust to different DGPs (e.g., it also holds for an AR(1) process, for which $\delta > 0.25$ is necessary for stationarity). A full investigation of this boundary effect would provide an interesting avenue for future research.

Figure A2: Monte Carlo simulation results for selecting the signal-to-noise ratio based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio



Notes: The solid line corresponds to the signal-to-noise ratio $\bar{\delta}$ on the y-axis that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio when applying the BN filter for each true signal-to-noise ratio δ on the x-axis given an AR(2) DGP. The dashed line is the 45 degree line, along which the selected signal-to-noise ratio would be equal the true signal-to-noise ratio (i.e., $\bar{\delta} = \delta$). Values below the 45 degree line correspond to a downward asymptotic bias.

A3 Confidence Bands

Here we present the details for how we calculate confidence bands for a BN cycle. We then report the 95% confidence bands for all of the estimates of the U.S. output gap based on a BN decomposition considered in the main text. For comparison, we also report 95% confidence bands for estimates based on deterministic detrending using the standard error of the regression and for the Harvey-Clark UC model using the Kalman smoother. Because they are not model-based methods, we do not report confidence bands for estimates based on the HP and BP filters.

To develop our approach to calculating confidence bands for a BN cycle, first recall that, following Morley (2002), the BN cycle, c_t^{BN} , at time t for an $AR(p)$ model is

$$c_t^{BN} = -[1 \ 0 \ \dots \ 0]F(I - F)^{-1}X_t, \quad (\text{A.2})$$

where $X_t = (\Delta\tilde{y}_t, \Delta\tilde{y}_{t-1}, \dots, \Delta\tilde{y}_{t-p+1})'$. Then it is straightforward to solve for the variance of the BN cycle, σ_c^2 , as follows:

$$\sigma_c^2 = [1 \ 0 \ \dots \ 0]F(I - F)^{-1}\Sigma_X((I - F)')^{-1}F'[1 \ 0 \ \dots \ 0]', \quad (\text{A.3})$$

where Σ_X is the variance of X_t and $vec(\Sigma_X) = (I - F \otimes F)^{-1}vec(Q)$, with Q being the variance-covariance matrix for the innovation vector of the companion form for the $AR(p)$ model:

$$Q = \begin{bmatrix} \sigma_e^2 & 0 & \dots \\ 0 & 0 & \ddots \\ \vdots & \ddots & \ddots \end{bmatrix}.$$

For the purpose of calculating confidence bands, we treat c_t^{BN} as an estimator of the true transitory component, c_t , of some unobserved components process $\{y_t\}$ with a trend that follows a random walk plus drift.³ From the definition of the BN decomposition and assuming the reduced-form dynamics for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ can be fully captured by an $AR(p)$ model, c_t^{BN} provides an unbiased estimator of the true c_t because τ_t^{BN} is an unbiased estimator of τ_t . Then, noting that the BN cycle in equation (A.2) inherits the assumed normality of $\Delta\tilde{y}_t$ and using the variance in equation (A.3), we can construct 95% confidence bands for the BN cycle by inverting a simple z -test that c_t is equal to a hypothesized fixed value c_t^0 as follows:

$$c_t^{BN} \pm 1.96\sigma_c. \quad (\text{A.4})$$

³See Morley (2011) for a discussion of the distinction between interpreting the BN cycle as an estimator of the transitory component of an unobserved components process or as the transitory component of a single-source-of-error process. If it were the latter, then the mean squared error of the BN cycle as an estimator would be zero and there would be no uncertainty about the true transitory component (beyond any finite-sample model parameter uncertainty, which we have abstracted from for simplicity).

This is the approach we take in Figure 3 of the main text using implied estimates for F and Σ_X in equations (A.2) and (A.3). Meanwhile, when calculating confidence bands for the BN cycle based on other forecasting models, the approach is essentially the same, but the structure and/or elements of the state-space/companion form matrices will be different.

In our paper, we consider the BN decomposition to avoid having to take a stand on the particular underlying unobserved components process (or possibly single-source-of-error process) that leads to reduced-form $AR(p)$ dynamics for $\{\Delta y_t\}$. It would be necessary to assume an exact specification of the underlying unobserved components process $\{y_t\}$ in order to construct confidence bands based on the mean squared error of the estimator of the transitory component c_t under the more standard assumption that it follows a stochastic process rather than treating it as a hypothesized fixed value c_t^0 . Given an exact specification, one could, in principle, apply the Kalman filter to calculate the confidence bands based on the variance of the filtered estimator of the transitory component, which, following Morley et al. (2003), is the same as c_t^{BN} for the corresponding reduced-form forecasting model. However, a reduced-form $AR(p)$ model for $\{\Delta y_t\}$ does not correspond to an identified unobserved components process with a transitory component that can be captured by a finite-order ARMA specification (see the discussion in Morley and Piger (2008)). Thus, this approach is not available in practice when dealing with an $AR(p)$ forecasting model and we propose using the approach detailed here instead.⁴

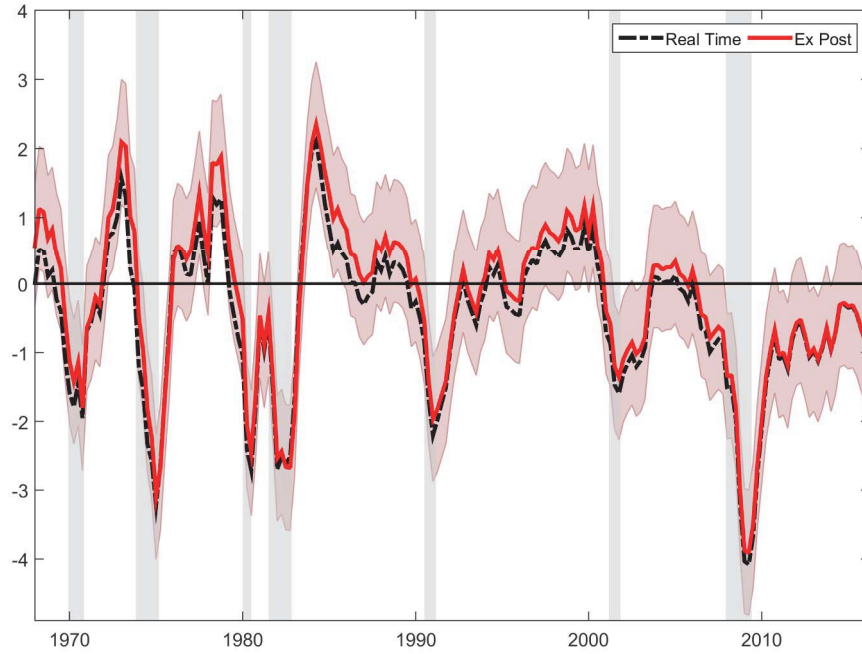
In terms of the U.S. output gap, Figure A3 plots the pseudo-real-time and ex post point estimates along with the ex post 95% confidence bands for the BN filter, the other BN decompositions, and deterministic detrending and the Harvey-Clark UC model. Figure A4 presents the proportion of output gap estimates that are statistically different from zero and the proportion of pseudo-real-time estimates that lie outside the ex post 95% confidence bands.⁵ The BN filter is the most precise method in the sense of the ex post estimates being statistically different than zero more often than for the other methods, yet it is also the most accurate in the sense that its pseudo-real-time estimates always

⁴The Kalman filter approach is available when dealing with an ARMA(2,2) forecasting model. We find that the bands based on our proposed approach here are much closer to the bands from the Kalman filter for an unobserved components model of U.S. log real GDP with an AR(2) transitory component and correlated movements in trend and cycle that produces the same filtered estimates as the BN cycle for the ARMA(2,2) model, as in Morley et al. (2003), than to the implied perfect certainty about the true transitory component for a corresponding single-source-of-error process. In particular, our bands are about three-quarters the width of those from the Kalman filter. The relative narrowness of our bands compared to those from the Kalman filter potentially make them less accurate (definitely so if the truth were the unobserved components process in Morley et al. (2003)), but it also makes the inferences relatively more precise. However, even with our narrower bands, we almost never reject zero for the BN cycle based on an ARMA(2,2) model, while the pseudo-real-time estimates appear to be accurate in the sense of always remaining within the 95% bands on the ex post estimate.

⁵We only count the proportion of statistically significant estimates and pseudo-real-time estimates within the bands from 1970Q1-2012Q4 in order to match the evaluation sample for revision statistics in the main text.

Figure A3: Pseudo-real-time and ex post U.S. output gap estimates with 95% confidence bands

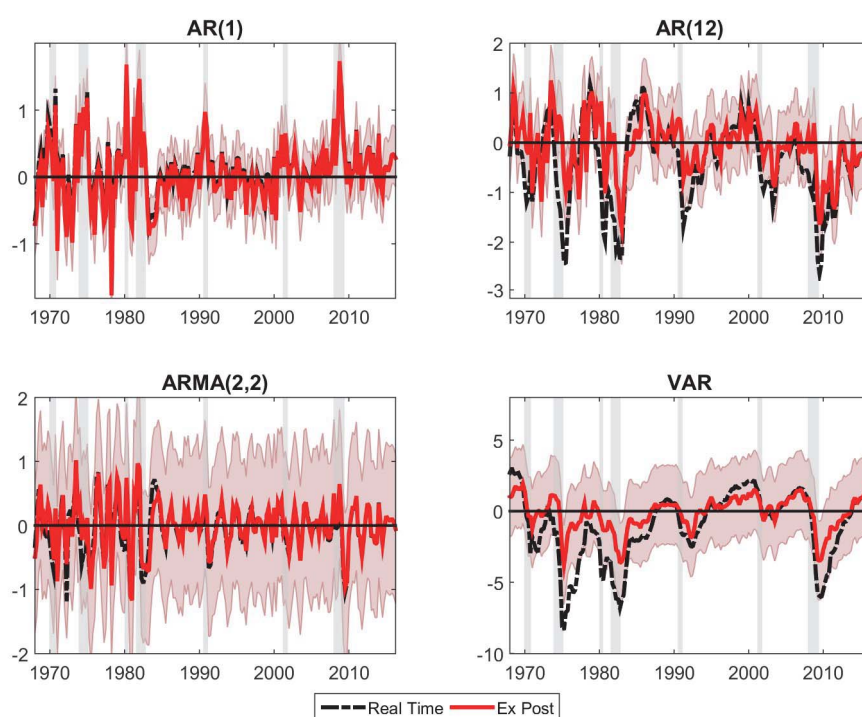
(a) BN filter



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. Shaded bands around the ex post estimate correspond to a 95% confidence interval from inverting a z -test that the true output gap is equal to a hypothesized value using the standard deviation of the BN cycle. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

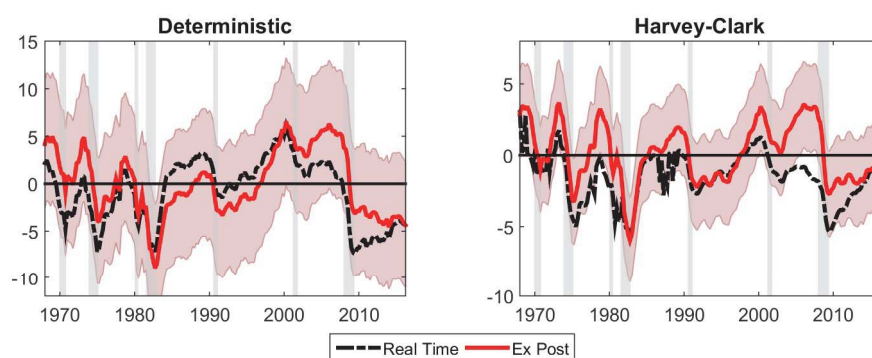
lie within ex post 95% bands. The BN decompositions based on the AR(12) and VAR models are particularly inaccurate, while still being less precise than the BN filter. The BN decomposition based on the AR(1) model is almost as precise as the BN filter and is accurate, while the BN decomposition based on the ARMA(2,2) model is not at all precise, although it is accurate. In terms of the other methods, the Harvey-Clark UC model produces inaccurate and relatively imprecise estimates, while deterministic detrending produces more accurate, but essentially uninformative estimates.

(b) BN decompositions for different forecasting models



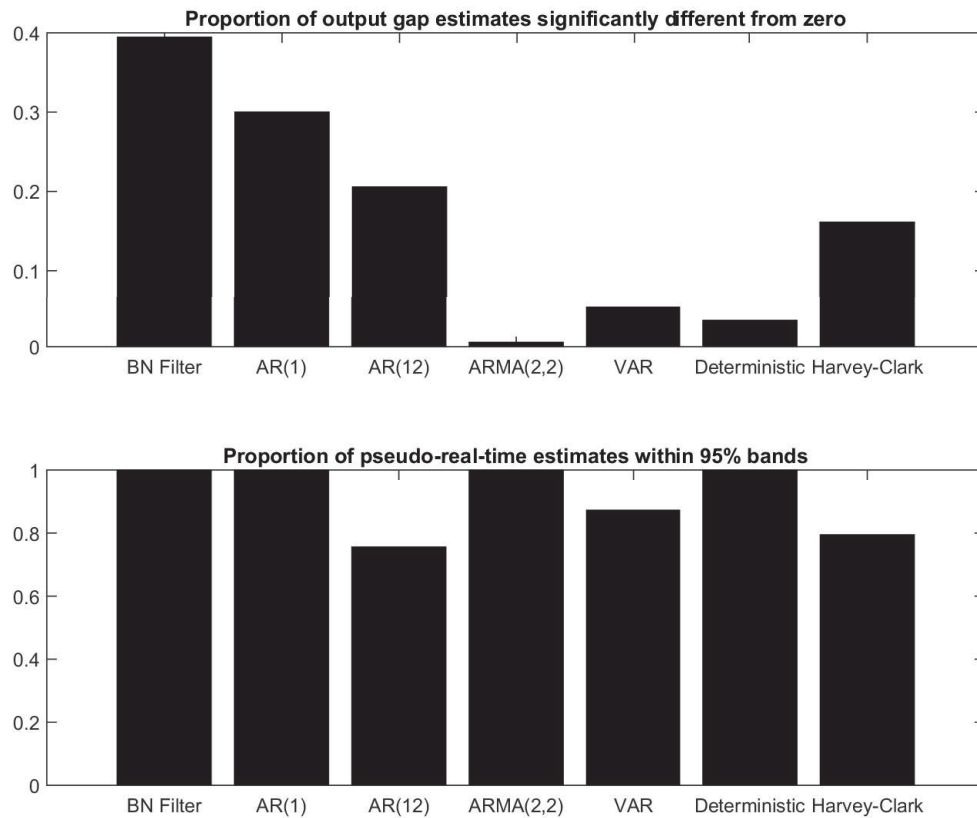
Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. Shaded bands around the ex post estimate correspond to a 95% confidence interval from inverting a z -test that the true output gap is equal to a hypothesized value using the standard deviation of the BN cycle. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

(c) Some other popular methods



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. Shaded bands around the ex post estimate correspond to a 95% confidence interval based on the standard error of the regression for deterministic detrending and the Kalman smoother for the Harvey-Clark UC model. Shaded bars correspond to NBER recession dates.

Figure A4: Precision and accuracy of U.S. output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. Precision is in terms of frequency with which ex post estimates are significantly different than zero. Accuracy is in terms of frequency with which pseudo-real-time estimates lie within the ex post 95% confidence bands.

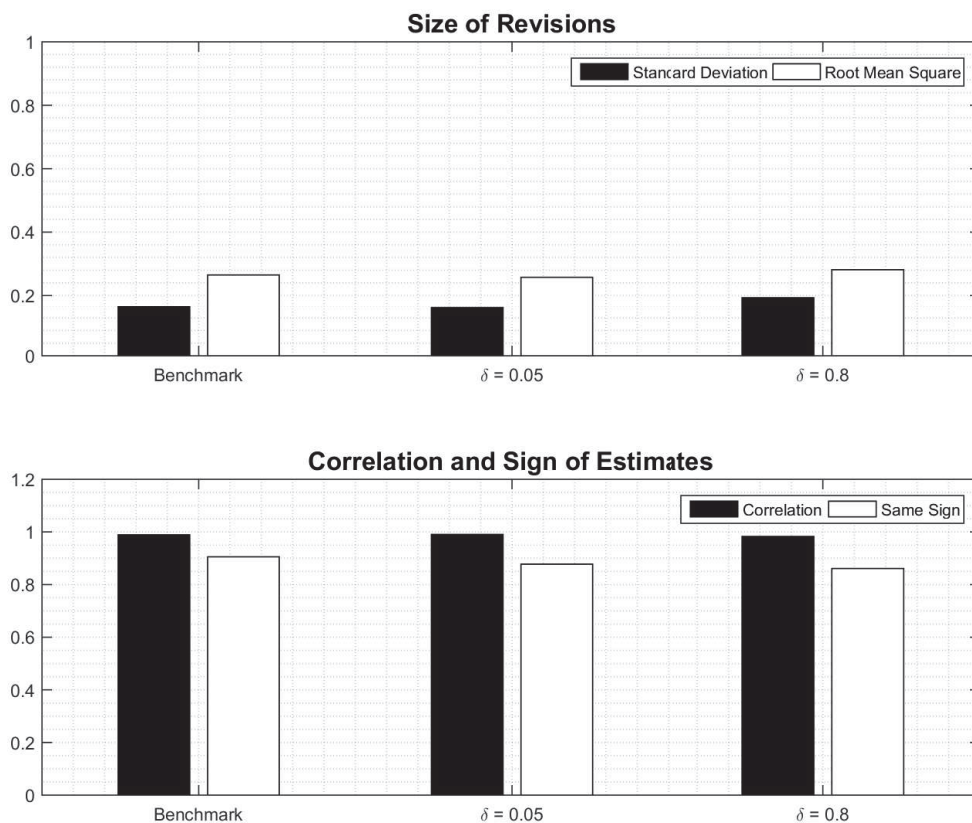
A4 Robustness to Other Low Values of δ

In the main text, we showed that changing δ to other low values affects the amplitude but not the shape of the estimated output gap for our proposed approach. In Figure A5, we verify that revision properties are robust to different low values of δ . In particular, we recalculate all of the revision statistics for $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$ and compare them to our benchmark case in which we chose δ in pseudo-real-time by maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio. Recall $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$ for the full sample and ranged between 0.21-0.26 in the pseudo-real-time analysis. The evaluation period is the same as in the main text. As can be seen in Figure A5, the revision statistics are very similar to the benchmark case.

We also redo the pseudo-out-of-sample forecast comparisons, once again for $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$. The sample period for forecast evaluation is kept the same as in the main text. Figures A6 and A7 present the output growth and inflation forecasting results in terms of relative root mean square errors (RRMSE), with the comparison being relative to the BN filter. As expected, because the shape of the estimated output gap is robust to different low values of δ , the forecast performance is very similar, with the relative root mean square error relative to the benchmark case extremely close to 1.

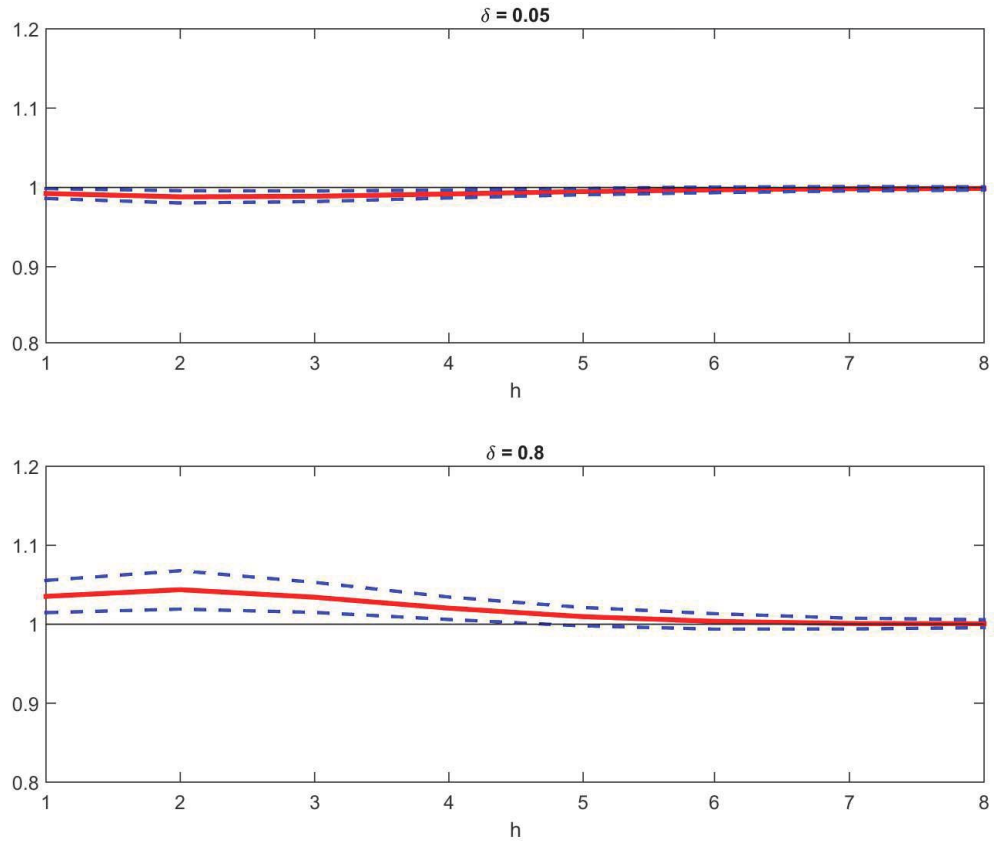
Based on these results, we conclude that our main findings are robust to different choices of a low value for δ . The only substantive effect of changing δ is an alteration in the amplitude of the estimated output gap, with revision properties and forecasting performance almost identical to our benchmark case.

Figure A5: Revision statistics for U.S. output gap estimates based on different signal-to-noise ratios



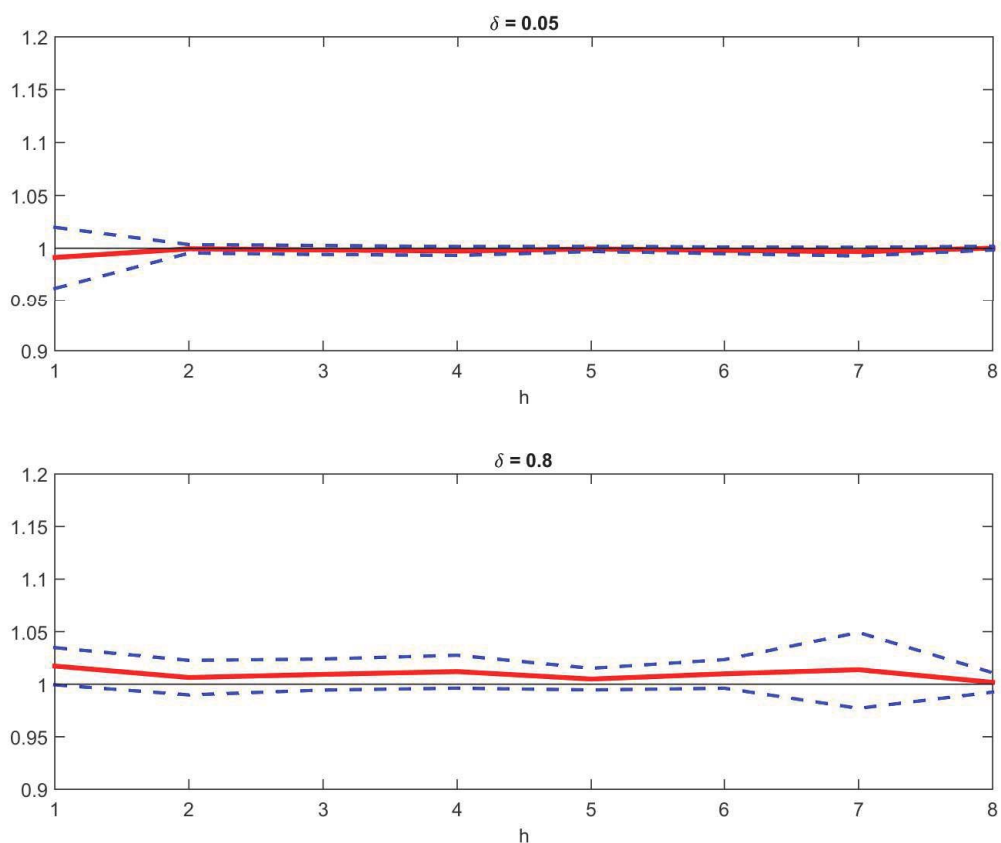
Notes: The benchmark selects $\bar{\delta}$ by maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio. For the full sample, $\bar{\delta} = 0.24$, while $\bar{\delta}$ varies between 0.21 - 0.26 in pseudo real time. Standard deviation and root mean square of revisions to the pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap are normalized by the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Correlation” refers to the correlation between the pseudo-real-time estimate and the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Same sign” refers to the proportion of pseudo-real-time estimates that share the same sign as the ex post estimate of the output gap. The sample period for calculation of revision statistics is 1970Q1-2012Q4.

Figure A6: Out-of-sample U.S. output growth forecast comparisons for different signal-to-noise ratios relative to the BN filter benchmark using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



Notes: The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE from a BN decomposition with $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$ compared to a BN filter based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio in pseudo-real-time. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

Figure A7: Out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparisons for different signal-to-noise ratios relative to the BN filter benchmark using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



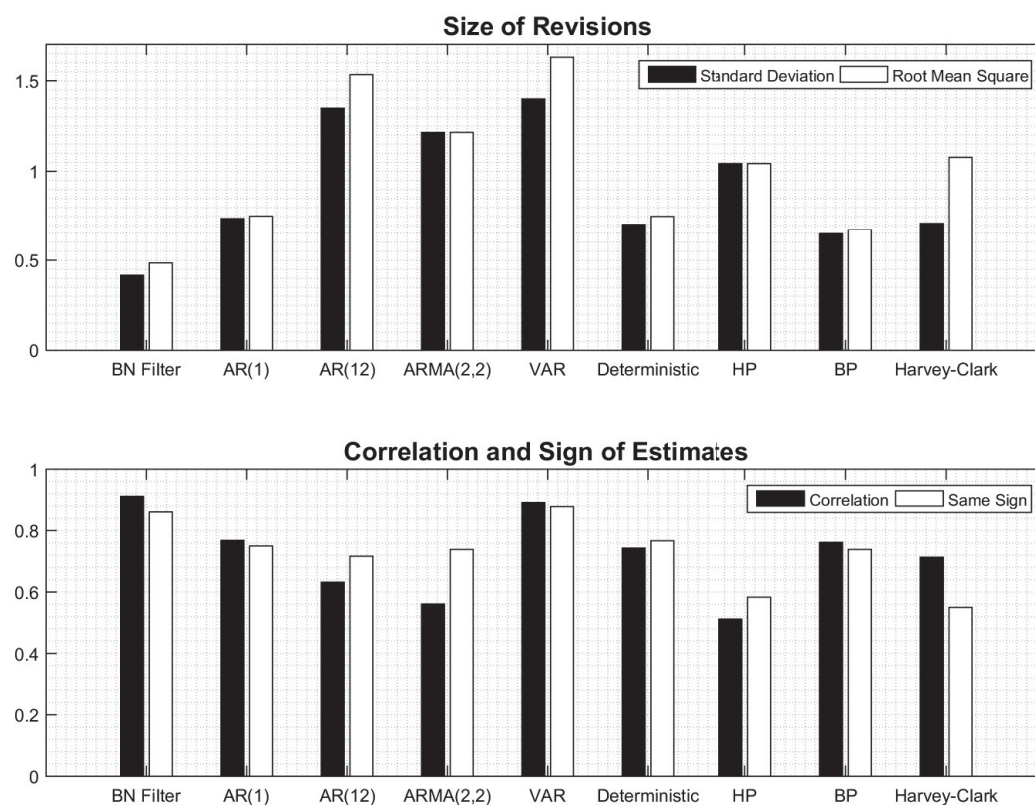
Notes: The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE from a BN decomposition with $\delta \in \{0.05, 0.8\}$ compared to a BN filter based on maximizing the amplitude-to-noise ratio in pseudo-real-time. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

A5 Results Using Real Time Data

As Orphanides and van Norden (2002) demonstrate, most of the revisions to output gap estimates are due to the filtering method rather than the data revisions to real GDP. However, it is an open question whether our main findings still hold when working with real time data. Thus, here, we redo our analysis of revision statistics and out-of-sample forecasting performance using real time data. All real time vintages are from the Philadelphia Fed’s real time datasets. Figure A8 reports the revision statistics and Figures A9 and A10 report the out-of-sample forecasting results. Once again, the sample period under evaluation matches that of the analysis in the main text.

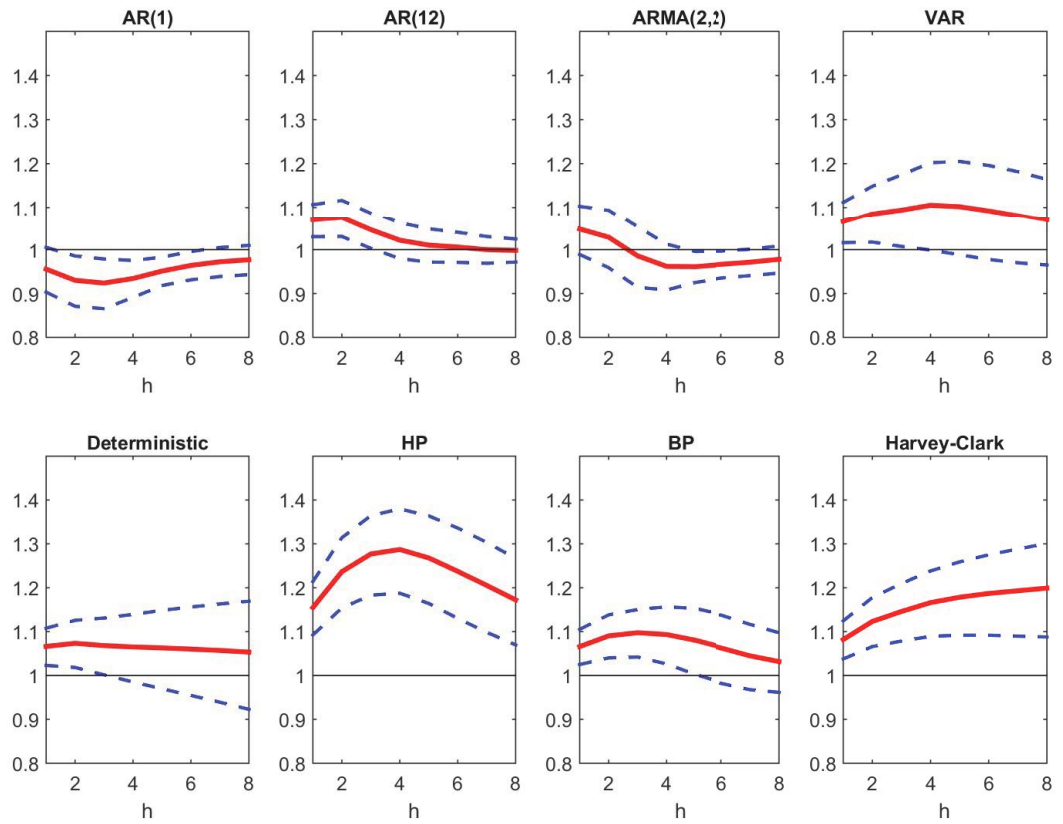
With regards to revision statistics, the BN Filter does much better in comparison to other methods with real time data relative to the pseudo-real-time case. Most notably, the BN filter’s revisions are now much smaller compared to the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model. A key reason for this is the output gap estimate obtained from the BN decomposition based on an AR(1) model lacks persistence and depends on only the recent output growth, meaning large data revisions in recent output growth will have considerable influence on the real time estimate. Our approach continues to do better than other approaches. The results of the out-of-sample forecasting exercise are very similar to or slightly better than those obtained using pseudo-real-time estimates. We therefore conclude that our main findings are robust to the use of real time data.

Figure A8: Revision statistics for U.S. output gap estimates using real time data



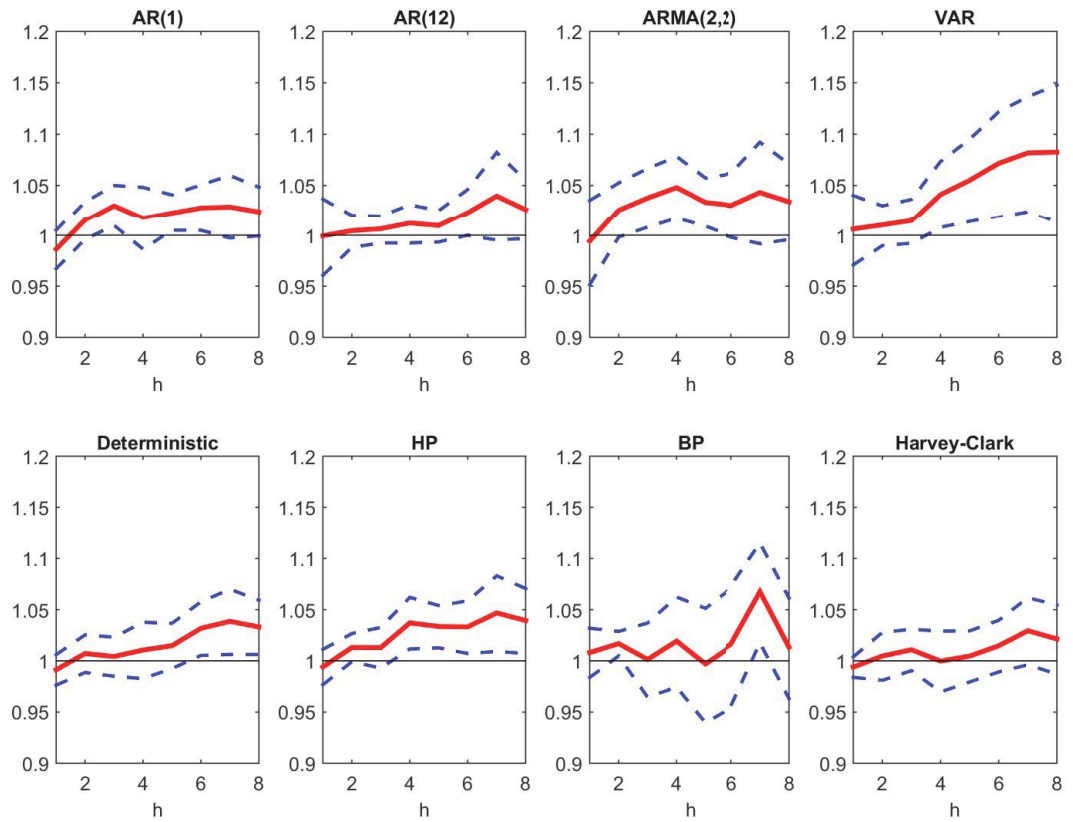
Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. Standard deviation and root mean square of revisions to the real-time estimate of the output gap are normalized by the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Correlation” refers to the correlation between the real-time estimate and the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Same sign” refers to the proportion of real-time estimates that share the same sign as the ex post estimate of the output gap. The sample period for calculation of revision statistics is 1970Q1 - 2012Q4.

Figure A9: Out-of-sample U.S. output growth forecast comparison relative to the BN filter benchmark using real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter estimated output gap. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

Figure A10: Out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparison relative to the BN filter benchmark using real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter estimated output gap. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

A6 More Results When Applying Dynamic Mean Adjustment

Possible Structural Break in 2006Q1 In the main text, we suggested that dynamically demeaning output growth using a backward-looking rolling 40-quarter average does a reasonable job at accounting for possible structural breaks in the data. Here we explore whether the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment is still reliable.

First, we recalculate revision statistics, taking the dated break from the Bai and Perron (2003) test in 2006Q1 as the “truth” when estimating the ex post output gap. As we argue in the main text, one should be careful about treating the break in 2006Q1 as the truth given there is evidence that the dated break may not be robust and future data may change the dating of a break (if any). With this caveat in mind, Figure A11 presents the revision statistics treating the 2006Q1 break date as the truth. Not surprisingly, the BN filter modified to use dynamic mean adjustment now has somewhat larger revisions given that dynamic mean adjustment leads to more noise in the estimated output gap in pseudo real time relative to knowing the truth about the structural break. In particular, the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment produces larger revisions given the dynamic mean adjustment relative to the estimated output gaps from BN decompositions based on AR(1) and ARMA(2,2) models. Recall, however, that these two models lead to estimated output gaps with small amplitude and, the case of the AR(1) model, an estimated output gap that moves countercyclically in terms of the NBER reference cycle. Relative to all the other methods that produce procyclical estimates, the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment is still comparatively reliable in terms of its revision properties.

Second, we redo the pseudo-out-of-sample forecasting analysis for both output growth and inflation with the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment serving as the benchmark. As Figures A12 and A13 show, the forecasting results are little changed relative to those in the main text, suggesting once again that despite the somewhat larger revisions, the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment remains reliable in the sense of avoiding producing a spurious cycle.

Dynamic Mean Adjustment for Other Countries In the main text, we show that dynamic mean adjustment does a reasonable job accounting for a possible break in 2006Q1 with U.S. data. We now also explore whether dynamic mean adjustment does a reasonable job for other countries as well. We thus apply the procedure for the non-U.S. G7 countries, Australia, and New Zealand. We first report in Table A1 the break dates as estimated for the Bai and Perron (2003) test. These are also the break dates which we use for the non-U.S. G7 countries, Australia, and New Zealand output gap estimates in the main text. Figure A14 presents the BN filter estimated output gaps for the non-U.S. G7 countries, Australia, and New Zealand using dynamic mean adjustment and for the

Table A1: Break dates according to Bai and Perron (2003) Test

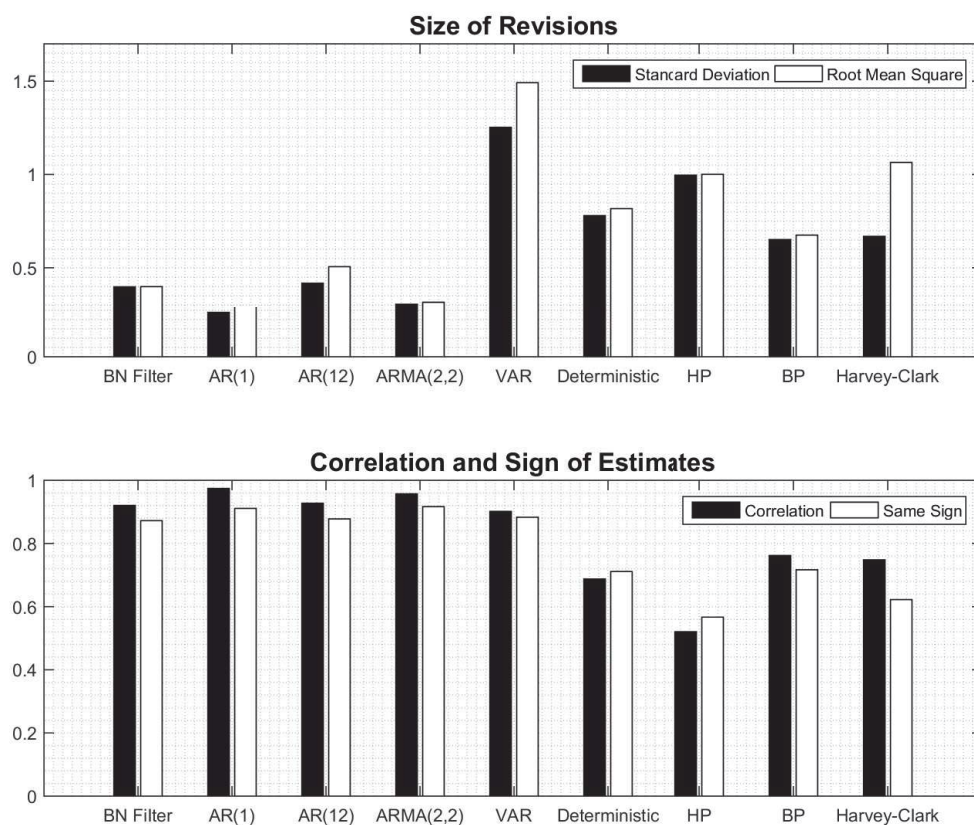
Australia	1971Q4
Canada	1974Q1
France	1974Q1
Germany	None
Italy	1973Q1, 1991Q2
Japan	1979Q4, 2008Q1
New Zealand	None
United Kingdom	None

break date(s) estimated by Bai and Perron (2003) procedures. A visual inspection suggest that dynamic mean adjustment is once again reasonably successful in accounting for the estimated breaks in long-run growth.

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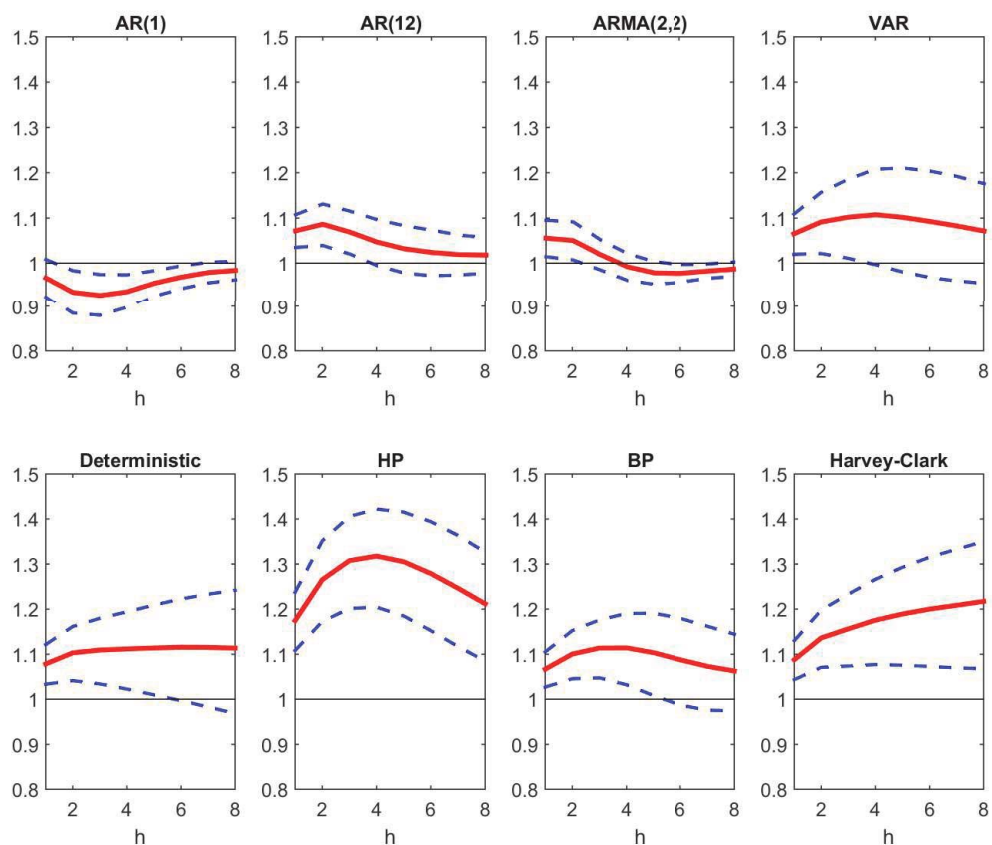
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Figure A11: Revision statistics for U.S. output gap estimates with the BN filter modified to use dynamic mean adjustment



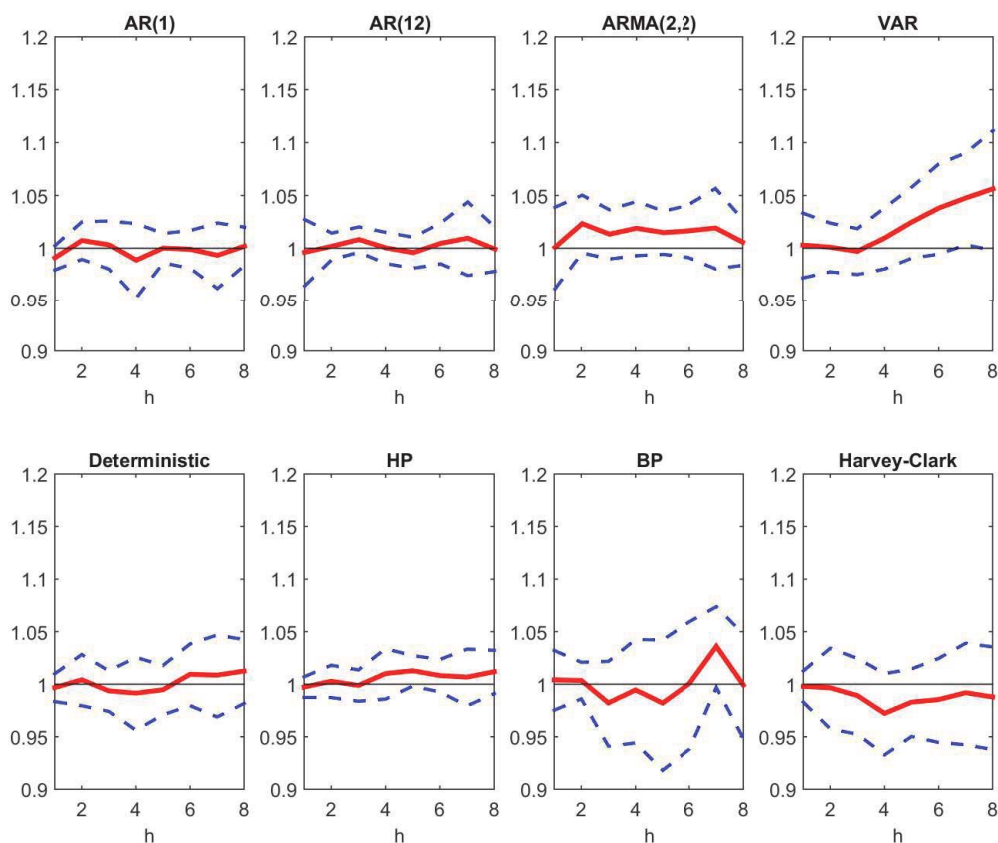
Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. Standard deviation and root mean square of revisions to the pseudo-real-time estimate of the output gap are normalized by the standard deviation of the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Correlation” refers to the correlation between the pseudo-real-time estimate and the ex post estimate of the output gap. “Same sign” refers to the proportion of real-time estimates that share the same sign as the ex post estimate of the output gap. The sample period for calculation of revision statistics is 1970Q1 - 2012Q4.

Figure A12: Out-of-sample U.S. output growth forecast comparison relative to the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

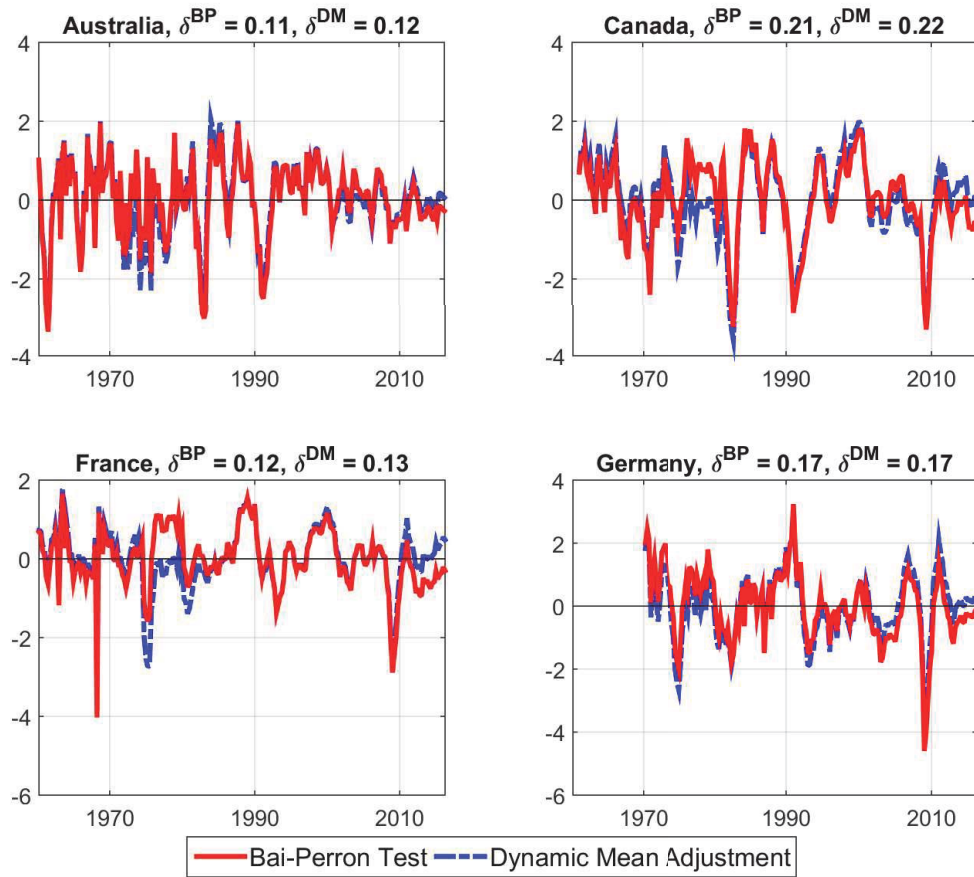
Figure A13: Out-of-sample U.S. inflation forecast comparison relative to the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment using pseudo-real-time output gap estimates



Notes: See notes for Figure A1 for descriptions of labels of methods. The graphs plot out-of-sample RRMSE compared to forecasts based on the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment. Out-of-sample evaluation begins in 1970Q1. The bands depict 90% confidence intervals from a two-sided Diebold and Mariano (1995) test of equal forecast accuracy.

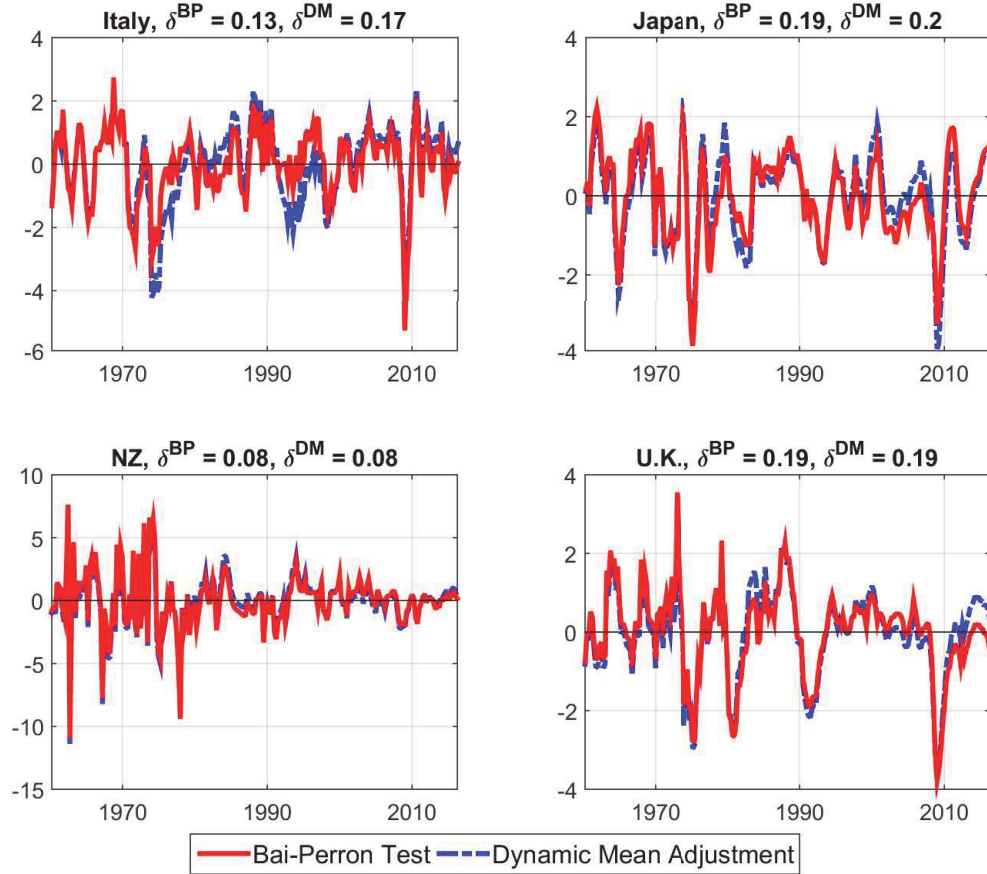
Figure A14: Output gap estimates from the BN filter allowing for structural change for the non-U.S. G7 countries, Australia, and New Zealand

(a)



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The solid line is the estimated output gap from the BN filter with break dates determined by the Bai and Perron (2003) test. δ^{BP} is the corresponding signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. The dashed line is the output gap from the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment. δ^{DM} is the corresponding signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio.

(b)



Notes: Units are 100 times natural log deviation from trend. The solid line is the estimated output gap from the BN filter with break dates determined by the Bai and Perron (2003) test. δ^{BP} is the corresponding signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio. The dashed line is the output gap from the BN filter with dynamic mean adjustment. δ^{DM} is the corresponding signal-to-noise ratio that maximizes the amplitude-to-noise ratio.