

**Teaching Material:**  
**Corporate Discount Rates and Cost of Capital in Practice**

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# Introduction

**Aim.** These slides provide an overview of how firms estimate their cost of capital and decide on discount rates in practice. Most of the material comes from [Gormsen and Huber \(2022a\)](#).

## Overview of slides

1. Capital budgeting in practice
2. Estimating the cost of capital
3. Firms' perceived cost of capital
4. Firms' final discount rates

## Auxiliary Material

- See [costofcapital.org](https://costofcapital.org) for additional material as well as data on firms' perceived cost of capital and discount rates

## Capital Budgeting in Practice

Managers often evaluate new projects based on their NPV:

$$\text{NPV} = \sum_{s=0}^S \delta^{-s} \mathbb{E}[\text{Revenue}_s - \text{Cost}_s].$$

**The discount rate**  $\delta$  is set based on the *perceived cost of capital* plus a wedge  $\kappa$ ,

$$\delta = 1 + r^{\text{per.}} + \kappa.$$

We will discuss where the wedge  $\kappa$  comes from later.

**Firms' perceived cost of capital** is based on the *financial cost of capital*. Firms estimate it based on financial markets, but they do so imperfectly, leading to a wedge  $\upsilon$ :

$$r^{\text{per.}} = r^{\text{fin.}} + \upsilon.$$

The resulting discount rates used by firms reflect two wedges:

$$\begin{aligned} \delta &= 1 + r^{\text{per.}} + \kappa \\ &= 1 + r^{\text{fin.}} + \upsilon + \kappa, \end{aligned}$$

Here,  $\upsilon$  is interpreted as a mistake whereas  $\kappa$  is a deliberate choice.

# Estimating the Financial Cost of Capital

## Definition

The first step of capital budgeting is to estimate the cost of capital in financial markets. It is the weighted average of cost of debt and cost of equity:

$$r_t^{\text{fin}} = \omega_t \times (1 - \tau) \times r_t^{\text{debt}} + (1 - \omega_t) \times r_t^{\text{equity}}, \quad (1)$$

where  $r_t^{\text{debt}}$  and  $r_t^{\text{equity}}$  are the cost of debt and equity,  $\tau$  is the firm's tax rate, and  $\omega_t$  is the leverage ratio (i.e., the market value of debt relative to the market value of debt plus equity).

## Estimation

See textbooks for specific guidelines on how to estimate the financial cost of capital (e.g., [Welch](#) or [Berk and DeMarzo](#)).

A few notes:

- **Cost of debt** can be somewhat easily inferred from interest expenses and yields on outstanding debt. Remember to account for credit risk!
- **Cost of equity** is most often estimated using the CAPM (see [Gormsen and Huber, 2022b](#)):

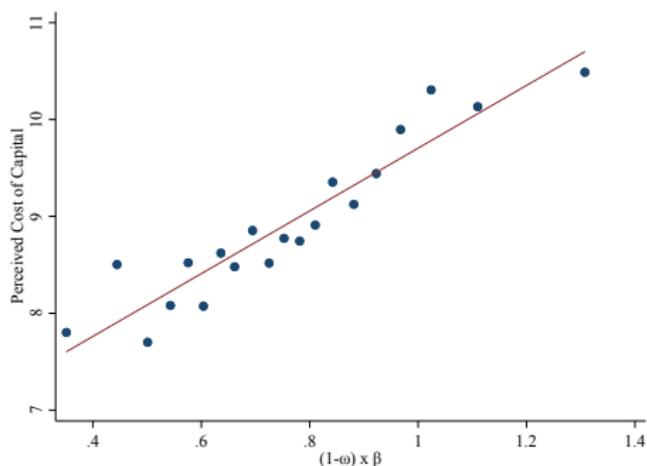
$$E_t^{\text{CAPM}}[r_t^{\text{equity,firm}}] = r_t^f + \beta_t^{\text{firm}} \lambda_t,$$

$\beta$  = exposure to the market portfolio. See [Welch \(2019\)](#) for optimal estimates

$\lambda$  = market risk premium. Remember, it is based on long run expected stock returns.

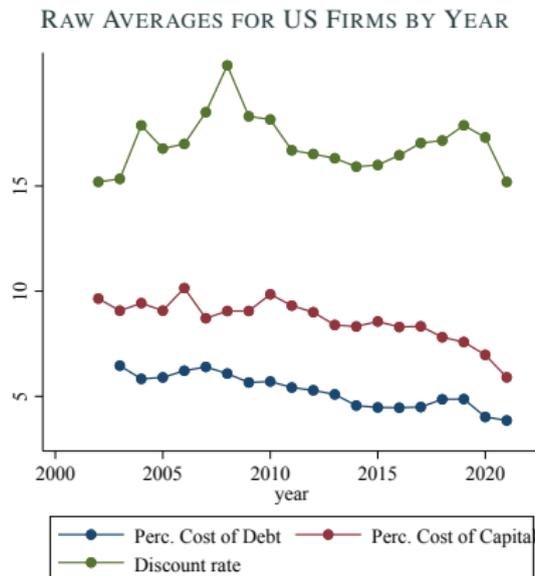
# The Perceived Cost of Capital in Practice

PERCEIVED COST OF CAPITAL VERSUS CAPM BETA



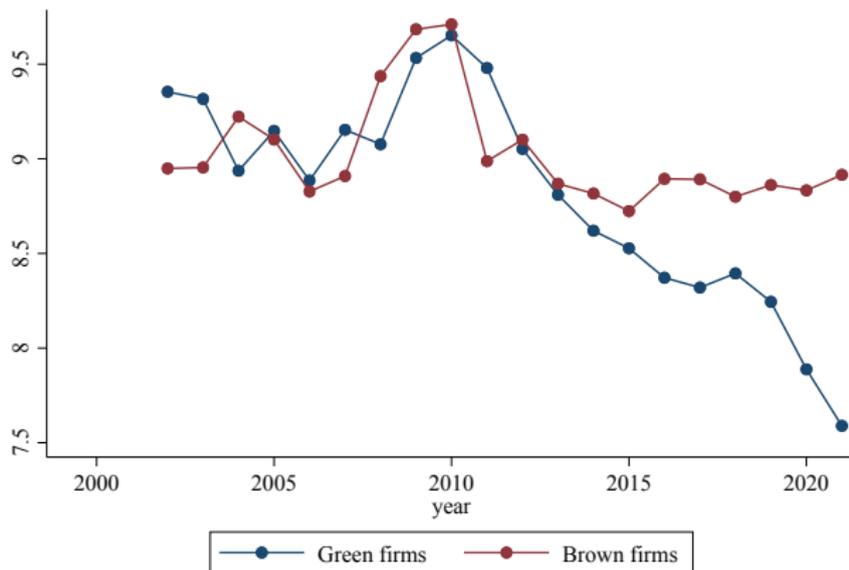
- Figure shows binned scatter of the relation between cost of capital and market betas.  $(1 - \omega)$  is the equity share of the firm
- Conclusion: firms with higher market betas have higher cost of capital
- See [Gormsen and Huber \(2022b\)](#) for details

# The Perceived Cost of Capital in Practice



- The perceived cost of capital has trended down substantially over time. Consistent with secular decline in the *financial* cost of capital
- But discount rates have not trended down as much (addressed below)
- See [Gormsen and Huber \(2022a\)](#) for detail

## The Perceived Cost of Capital Is Falling for Greener Firms



- Recently, the number of environmentally conscious, green investors has increased
- Has this trend lowered the cost of capital of green firms by more? Firms believe that the answer is yes
- Discount rates of green firms have also fallen by more, see [Gormsen and Huber \(2023\)](#) for details

# From the Perceived Cost of Capital to Discount Rates

What is  $\kappa$ ?

$$\delta = 1 + r^{\text{per}} + \kappa$$

$\kappa$  is an additional premium firms add on top of their perceived cost of capital. Sometimes referred to as “hurdle premium.”

Why do firms add  $\kappa$ ?

Standard theory tells managers to set  $\delta = 1 + r^{\text{per}}$ . Why might they add  $\kappa$  in practice?

1. Many managers want to maximize the **economic value added** (i.e., the profits earned in excess of the cost of capital). They believe  $\kappa > 0$  helps them do so.
2. Managers account for higher risk on their new projects by increasing  $\kappa$ .
3. Managers use  $\kappa$  to capture financial and organizational constraints.

TABLE 6 FROM GORMSEN AND HUBER (2022A)

VARIABLES	(1) Discount rate	(2) $\kappa$	(3) $\kappa + \nu$
Market Power (2002)	1.30* (0.63)	1.18* (0.60)	1.23* (0.60)
Risk (2002)	2.14*** (0.57)	1.72*** (0.53)	1.47*** (0.50)
Fin. Constraints (2002)	0.83 (0.56)	0.97 (0.57)	1.05* (0.55)
Observations	799	799	799
R-squared	0.184	0.169	0.163
FE	Country/year	Country/year	Country/year
Cluster	Firm/year	Firm/year	Firm/year
Within $R^2$	0.12	0.10	0.095

Robust standard errors in parentheses, \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

## From the Perceived Cost of Capital to Discount Rates

**Quotes.** Below are quotes from managers on why they use high discount rates (i.e., high  $\kappa$ ). Note that managers often refer to discount rates as “hurdle rates.”

2016-11-10, Halyard Health Inc., Steve Voskuil, CFO: *“...So that’s kind of how we come to the 9 percent [hurdle rate]. We start with the capital markets’ rates and look at our capital structure, and then we add a little bit to that to reflect risk in the portfolio and execution.”*

2016-10-19, Kinder Morgan, Kim Dang, CFO: *“We are living within our cash flow, meaning that we want to be able to fund our CapEx and our dividend from our cash flow. And so that is the constraint, and so, because we have a limited amount of capital, that is why we have the hurdle rate set at 15 percent IRR for projects.”*

2009-07-30, Lincoln National Corporation, Fred Crawford, CFO: *“As a matter of being conservative in our approach, we’ve been hiking up those discount rates quite considerably on our businesses (...). Example being variable business is up into the mid teens with life businesses in and around the 10 percent range, even 11 percent range, depending on the business. But that’s for purposes of being conservative.”*

2009-01-14, Ryland Group, Inc., Larry Nicholson, President & COO: *“Our hurdle rates have always been 30 percent as long as I’ve been with the Company – that’s 14 years – and Chad, as long as he’s been with the Company, has maintained that. I think that’s served us well, kept us from doing some things maybe that would have hurt us in the downturn. I think it kept us out of a lot of trouble. So I think the strategy’s been good. I think it’s been prudent.”*