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Balance sheet versus earnings conservatism in Europe

Juan Manuel García Lara & Araceli Mora

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Abstract

In this study we extend prior research on the international analysis of accounting conservatism by examining the relationship between earnings and book value of equity (United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands) using the definition of conservatism proposed by Dechow and Ohlson (1995). We compare the results across countries.

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practices in all countries under study. In addition, while continental countries show larger balance sheet conservatism, differences in earnings conservative practices between countries are not that pronounced, although they tend to be larger in the UK. We also find that the existence of balance sheet conservative practices is associated with reduced levels of earnings conservatism, which is consistent with the results in Pope and Walker (2003).

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¹⁰Results of comparative studies on earnings conservatism can be affected by differences in income smoothing (see Leuz et al., [2003](#)).

¹¹Basu et al. ([2001](#)) show that those firms audited by the Big Five (Six, Eight) auditing firms are more earnings conservative. Pope and Walker ([2003](#)) analyse how the understatement of shareholders' equity, as reflected in the market-to-book ratio, is affecting the measures of earnings conservatism. They find, for the US, that when the market-to-book ratio is small, earnings conservatism is more pronounced. Ryan and Zarowin ([2003](#)) analyse the relationship between earnings and returns, studying both the existence of earnings conservatism and of the prices leading-earnings phenomenon. Helbok and Walker ([2001](#)) analyse the implication of earnings conservatism on analysts' earnings forecasts. Beekes et al. ([2003](#)) analyse whether earnings conservatism measures vary with the composition of the board of directors, and similarly, Huijgen and Lubberink ([2001a](#)) link earnings conservatism with managerial incentives. Garrod and Valentincic ([2001](#)) argue that the asymmetry can be explained by shareholders' liquidation option. Giner and Grambovas ([2001](#)) analyse the existence of earnings conservatism in ten European countries showing that the degree of earnings conservatism is larger in case of monetary crisis. Raonic et al. ([2003](#)), focusing on European interlisted firms, argue that differences between European countries can be explained by several institutional factors. Chandra et al. ([2001](#)) examine conservatism in US high-tech firms. Finally, Huijgen and Lubberink ([2001b](#)) compare Dutch firms cross-listing in the US with those that do not, finding the former more conservative.

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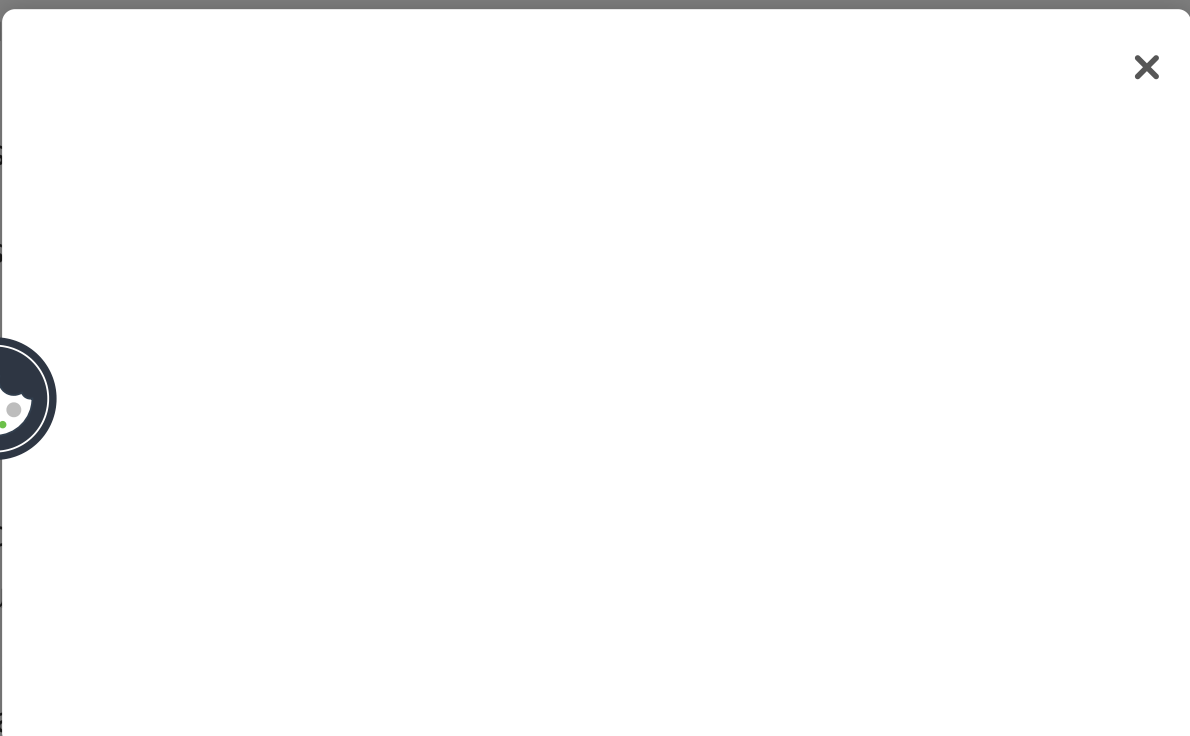


Table 1, we can see that there is a larger variability of all variables in Switzerland, to the extent that if we include Switzerland in the continental group, Swiss observations would behave as outliers, and drive the results for the whole group.

¹⁵Using bottom-line earnings we are closer to maintaining the clean surplus relation, which Feltham and Ohlson (1995) models assume. Additionally, we are also consistent with the definition of earnings that we find more appropriate to measure earnings conservatism.

¹⁶As in Feltham and Ohlson (1995), we assume a linear relationship between price and book value and earnings. Although empirical analysis of US data, i.e. Burgstahler and Dichev (1997), suggests that this relation is non-linear, this is beyond the scope of our study. Nevertheless, we believe that further research targeting this particular misspecification of the model should be encouraged.

¹⁷Our results obtained from applying the Fama and McBeth (1973) analysis should be interpreted with caution. The analysis by Fama and McBeth (1973) assumes that the relations between variables are stationary over time. However, in our theoretical analysis we assume that Western European countries are converging under the EU directives. Also, the aggregate market-to-book ratio increases systematically over time in most countries. Basu (2001) shows as well serious concerns about the results of the annual regressions of Fama and McBeth, when used in capital-markets-based accounting research.

¹⁸To avoid the creation of artificial scale problems that could even lead to the non-linearity of those observations where the deflation is smaller than one observation where

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²¹Greater persistence of earnings is one of the possible explanations as to why the earnings multiple is smaller in continental countries compared to the UK. Other explanations include, for instance, differences in growth (although this is not supported by our empirical evidence) and risk. Results in other papers, like Ball et al. (2000) or Leuz et al. (2003), suggesting greater income smoothing in code-law-based countries are not necessarily contrary to our results. Income smoothing leads to greater earnings persistence, but this does not necessarily imply that earnings persistence in continental countries will be greater than in the UK.

²²We also check whether the total bad news effect ($\beta_2 + \beta_3$) is statistically significant. For earnings conservatism to exist, it is not only necessarily a significant incremental sensitivity of bad news with respect to good news, but also that the total effect of bad news is statistically significant. We analyse this extent through a Wald test, finding that the total bad news response coefficient is significantly positive in all countries.

²³In the case of the pooled regression, if we compare the UK with the group of continental countries and exclude Spain and Switzerland from the analysis, the significance of the difference between the UK and the continental group would increase. But still, we could not strongly argue that there are significant differences, particularly taking into account that when we use Fama and McBeth regressions the differential coefficient of bad news in continental countries with respect to the UK is close to zero.

²⁴This result is not reported, but is available from the authors upon request.

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