

## ECON 301, Prof. Hogendorn

### Problem Set 4

1. *Laffer*. The "Laffer Curve" first became famous in the Reagan administration. It shows that when taxes are high enough, raising taxes can actually *reduce* tax revenue. While the theory is sound, its application to the U.S. income tax did not raise revenue under Reagan or either Bush.

Suppose there is a tax  $t$  so that consumer pay price  $p$  and sellers receive price  $p - t$ . Demand is  $x(p)$ , and supply is  $s(p - t)$ .

- (a) Graph the tax and show the deadweight loss. Explain in words the deadweight loss.
  - (b) What is the change in equilibrium price when the tax changes? I.e., what is  $\frac{dp}{dt}$ ? Express this in terms of elasticities as much as possible.
  - (c) Now since tax revenue is  $TR = tx(p)$ , find  $\frac{dTR}{dt}$ . Put it in elasticity form as much as possible.
  - (d) Is it possible that raising the tax could reduce the revenue the government receives? Prove or disprove by signing the derivative from (c).
  - (e) Explain in words the logic of part (d). Make sure you use the word "elasticity" in your answer.
2. *Ethanol*. In the United States, the Federal Government gives a "blenders credit" of 5.1 cents per gallon of ethanol. This subsidy goes to oil refineries who buy the ethanol in order to blend into their gasoline. Thus, from the point of view of the *ethanol* market, the blenders credit is a per-unit subsidy to *consumers* of ethanol. To model this, let demand and supply be

$$x(p) = a - b(p - g) \quad s(p) = \alpha p$$

where  $a$ ,  $\epsilon$ , and  $\alpha$  are parameters,  $p$  is price in cents per gallon, and  $g$  represents the blenders credit.

- (a) What is the equilibrium price and quantity?
- (b) Find the formula for how much the government pays out at equilibrium? Use the derivative to discuss how the government payout changes as  $g$  changes? What is the *elasticity* of the government payout with respect to the subsidy?
- (c) Show social and private demand curves and the deadweight loss on a graph.

Review Problems, not to turn in:

3. Levin. This question is inspired by Senator Carl Levin's report on gas prices (April 2002).

- (a) There is a rule of thumb in the oil industry that each 10 cent increase in the price of gas adds \$10 billion to oil industry revenues. This implies that

$$0.10 \frac{dTR}{dp} = 10,000,000,000$$

Show that you can obtain an elasticity estimate of  $\epsilon = -0.23$  from this formula if you also know that the total quantity of gas consumed per year is 130 billion gallons.

- (b) The average American spends \$1,060 per year on gas and consumes 700 gallons. Let us suppose that the average American has an income of  $m = 50,000$ . Suppose you want to calibrate a demand curve of the following form :

$$y(p) = Amp^\epsilon$$

Show that  $A = 0.0154$ .

- (c) Perhaps we have chosen a bad demand function. Consider the following two demand functions:

$$y(p) = A\sqrt{m}p^\epsilon$$
$$y(p) = Am^2p^\epsilon$$

Draw the Engel curves that correspond to these functions. Which one is more reasonable for gas?

4. *Slownet*. You opened an Internet Service Provider called Slow.net. You currently have 4,000 subscribers and 1,200 modems. No more than 25% of your customers are ever online at one time. You charge \$20 per month for a subscription. You hear that America Online has a price elasticity of  $-1.2$ , and you think your own elasticity is the same.
- (a) Your marketing expert has suggested that lowering your price would raise total revenue. Use the derivative of total revenue to prove whether this is true or false.
  - (b) Suppose you lowered the price to \$15. How many subscribers would you expect to get, assuming you have a linear demand curve?
  - (c) Do you need more modems now that the price is \$15?
  - (d) Find your revenue at the price of \$20 and \$15. Explain the difference in light of part (a).
5. *Thornton*. Suppose the mayor of Middletown proposes a new tax on restaurant meals to finance Main Street improvements. Restaurant meals are elastically supplied at  $s(p_s) = -5600 + 400p_s$ . The tax will be a per unit tax, so the price restauranteurs receive is  $p_s$  and the price diners must pay is  $p = p_s + t$ . Demand for restaurant meals is  $x(p) = 500 - 3p$ .
- (a) Show the equilibrium price and quantity without the tax are \$15.14 and 456 respectively. Find the demand and supply

elasticities at this equilibrium, and explain (in words) who will pay the tax, producers or consumers?

- (b) Show that the change in  $p_s$  when there is a change in the tax is 0.00744. Use the total derivative of the equilibrium condition.
- (c) Find a formula for  $p_s(t)$ , the equilibrium producer price given a tax of  $t$ . Then find formulas for  $S(p_s(t))$ , government revenue, and for deadweight loss as functions of  $t$ . The changes in government revenue and deadweight loss are respectively:

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = 456 - 5.96t \quad \frac{dDWL}{dt} = 2.98t$$

- (d) Is it possible for the mayor to get in a situation where he or she cannot raise enough tax revenue to fund the improvements without causing more deadweight loss than the gains to Middletown from having the improvements? Explain with reference to the above formulas and to the elasticities of supply and demand.

### Answer to Review Problems:

#### 3. *Levin\_a.*

- (a) We find this by expanding the derivative of total revenue and manipulating it to get the elasticity formula:

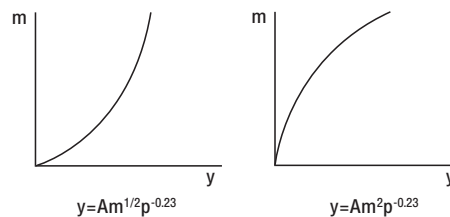
$$\begin{aligned} 0.10 \frac{dTR}{dp} &= 10,000,000,000 \\ 0.10 \left( y + p \frac{dy}{dp} \right) &= 10,000,000,000 \\ 0.10y \left( 1 + \frac{p}{y} \frac{dy}{dp} \right) &= 10,000,000,000 \\ (1 + \epsilon) &= \frac{100,000,000,000}{y} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\epsilon &= \frac{100,000,000,000}{130,000,000,000} - 1 \\ \epsilon &= 0.77 - 1 \\ \epsilon &= -0.23\end{aligned}$$

(b) First, the average price of gas must be  $\frac{1060}{700} = 1.51$ . Given that, we need to fit the demand curve:

$$\begin{aligned}700 &= A \cdot 50,000 \cdot 1.51^{-0.23} \\ 0.014 &= A \cdot 0.91 \\ 0.0154 &= A\end{aligned}$$

(c) The Engel curves depend on the  $m$  term only, and look like:



The first function is probably more reasonable, because we would expect gas to be a necessity, rising with income but not at as great a rate. Of course, up to a point, SUVs, ATVs, and boats might make gas a luxury.

#### 4. *Slownet\_a.*

(a)

$$\begin{aligned}R &= px(p) & \frac{dR}{dp} &= p \frac{dx}{dp} + x(p) \\ \frac{dR}{dp} < 0 & \Rightarrow p \frac{dx}{dp} < -x(p) \\ \Rightarrow \frac{dx}{dp} \frac{p}{x(p)} < -1 & \Rightarrow \epsilon < -1\end{aligned}$$

Since  $\epsilon = -1.2$  this condition holds, and we do predict that a decrease in price will increase revenue.

- (b) If demand is  $a - bp$ , its slope is  $-b$ . If we plug  $p = 20$ ,  $x = 4000$  into the elasticity formula, we get

$$\frac{dx}{dp} \frac{p}{x(p)} = -b \frac{20}{4000} = -1.2 \Rightarrow b = 240$$

Then  $a - 240(20) = 4000 \Rightarrow a = 8800$ .

At  $p = \$15$ ,  $8800 - 240 \cdot 15 = 5200$ .

- (c)  $.25 \cdot 5200 = 1300 > 1200$ , so yes, more modems will be needed.
- (d)  $15 \cdot 5200 = \$78000$ .  $20 \cdot 4000 = \$80000$ .

A linear demand curve does not have a constant elasticity. Therefore, although the elasticity may be  $-1.2$  when the price is  $\$20$ , this does not hold for  $p = \$15$ . The elasticity is calculated at a point, just like a derivative. When the price moves far from this point (in this case it falls 25%), the approximation becomes inaccurate.

#### 5. Thornton\_a.

- (a) Setting demand equal to supply gives:

$$500 - 3p_s = -5600 + 400p_s \Rightarrow p_s = 15.14, \quad s(15.14) = 456$$

The elasticities are  $\epsilon = -0.1$  and  $\epsilon_s = 13.28$ .

- (b) The equilibrium condition is

$$500 - 3(p_s + t) = -5600 + 400p_s$$

The total derivative is then

$$-3 \left( \frac{dp_s}{dt} + 1 \right) = 400 \frac{dp_s}{dt}$$

We can solve this for

$$\frac{dp_s}{dt} = -0.00744$$

(c)

$$500 - 3(p_s + t) = -5600 + 400p_s$$

$$6100 - 3t = 403p_s$$

$$p_s = 15.14 - \frac{3}{403}t$$

$$S(p_s) = -5600 + 400\left(15.14 - \frac{3}{403}t\right) = 456 - 2.98t$$

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dR}{dt} &= \frac{dtS(p_s)}{dt} \\ &= \frac{d456t - 2.98t^2}{dt} = 456 - 5.96t\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dDWL}{dt} &= \frac{d\frac{1}{2}(456 - s(p_s))t}{dt} \\ &= \frac{d\frac{1}{2}(456 - 456 + 2.98t)t}{dt} \\ &= \frac{d1.49t^2}{dt} = 2.98t\end{aligned}$$

(d) We know supply is very elastic and demand very inelastic. That means that adding a tax will basically increase the price to consumers a lot. As the tax increases, the marginal government revenue added goes down while the deadweight loss rises. Eventually, you reach a tax such that

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = 456 - 5.96t = 2.98t = \frac{dDWL}{dt} \Rightarrow t = 51$$

So, once the tax reaches 51, each marginal increase in tax causes more DWL than it does tax revenue.