Uncertainty Shock Events and Jumps in Stock Returns during the U.S. Great Depression

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Abstract

Stock market volatility was extremely high during the Great Depression as compared to any other period in American history before or since, as discussed by Officer (1973) and Schwert (1990). While the value of the stock market declined significantly over this period, this volatility is not driven by steady changes. Large negative and positive discontinuous jumps in stock returns can be detected for the 1930s using the Barndorff-Nielsen-Shephard test for jumps in financial time-series. These jumps coincided with periods when stock volatility was high, as arrival of new information about the uncertain future drove both the record stock volatility and the record jumps in stock returns. I also show that these stock market changes occur at the same time as output was declining in the USA. A timeline of the period is outlined, with important events that drove uncertainty highlighted such as banking crises, policy changes, the breakdown of the gold standard, monetary policy uncertainty, and war jitters.

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1 Introduction

The Great Depression was a superlative period in American history, with record output declines, record unemployment, and economic weakness which persisted for over a decade. With the benefit of hindsight it may seem clear that the Great Depression was a temporary aberration for an economy which has seen persistent growth throughout its recorded economic history. Those that lived through the Depression however,\(^1\) experienced unprecedented uncertainty shocks, including a major banking and financial crisis, uncertainty monetary policies, an uncertain international monetary system based on the gold standard, and major government policy changes. I outline major events by examining the historical record that could plausibly have driven uncertainty. As stock prices are based on expectations of future profitability, increased uncertainty about future profitability should generate higher stock volatility. I tie these events to stock volatility, which was high at the same time as uncertainty shocks were buffeting the American economy.

The 1930s in the United States saw extremely high stock volatility which was unprecedented in both magnitude and persistence, as shown by Officer (1973) and Schwert (1990). This volatility was not just a series of trading days with negative returns as the 1930s saw both some of the largest positive and negative returns in U.S. history, which can be seen in Table 1. Real GDP, the GDP deflator, and total employment are plotted in Figure 1, and all variables fall during the 1929-1933 and 1937-1938 recession and are flat or rising otherwise. Figure 2 shows the behavior of stock volatility over this period with the record stock volatility of the Great Depression appearing as a shaded bar. Figure 3 show the volatility over the entire 1929-1941 period, with can see that the period of most rapid decline in output and prices are also times when stock volatility is high, while times when output is recovering are times that stock volatility is low.

I define an uncertainty shock to be a significant rise in the dispersion of future expected income. Dixit and Pindyck and their coauthors have produced an extensive literature on investment under uncertainty.\(^2\) In general in these models, firms face uncertainty over revenue and costs when making

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\(^1\)Cogley and Sargent (2008) show that the Great Depression is a watershed for equity markets, with the Sharpe ratio, a market price of risk, being permanently higher after the Depression.

\(^2\)See Pindyck (1991, 1993); Abel et al. (1996); Caballero and Pindyck (1996); Pindyck (1988); Majd and Pindyck (1987); Dixit and Goldman (1970); Dixit (1992, 1993); Dixit and Pindyck (1994).
an irreversible investment. As some future states of the world can be characterized by low profits, firms delay investment (McDonald and Siegel, 1986). I follow Schwert’s characterization of stock market volatility as directly reflecting economic uncertainty: “[T]he volatility of stock returns reflects uncertainty about future cash flows and discount rates, or uncertainty about the process generating future cash flows and discount rates” (Schwert, 1990, 85).

Veronesi (1999) develops a financial model with a regime shift between high and low economic uncertainty which produces significant variation in stock volatility over time which provides a theoretical justification for the connection between uncertainty and stock volatility. Following the intuition in Veronesi (1999), I argue that uncertainty shocks will correspond to period of high volatility, as uncertainty over the expected profitability of firms generates high stock volatility. Volatility in discount rates would also divert stock volatility higher, as asset prices are determined by an interplay between discount rates and expected returns. This theory is both able to explain why stock returns made large upwards and downward movements as well as explaining the persistently high volatility through uncertainty, as this is a prediction of uncertainty theory. This argument can also help explaining when the American economy was in recession during these periods, as these uncertainty shocks would have reduced investment and consumption, which fell sharply during the Depression. To confirm the correct identification of uncertainty shocks from the historical record, I use the bipower variation test of Barndorff-Nielsen and Shephard (2006) to show that not only was stock volatility high, but also the level of stock returns were constantly gyrating in large upward and downturn jumps at the same time. I then analyze the historical record to show the types of events that could have given rise to high measured uncertainty during the periods when output was falling in the 1930s.

An implication of the theory of investment under uncertainty as in Dixit and Pindyck (1994) is that periods of high uncertainty should cause firms to postpone investment and consumers to postpone consumer durable purchases. As Bernanke (1983) argues, if enough consumers and firms postpone these expenditures, then aggregate expenditures would fall and a recession would result. Both measures of volatility are high during the 1929-1933 and 1937-1938 recessions, which makes it

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3This also helps explain the excess volatility puzzle of Shiller (1981) where dividend volatility is not sufficient to explain equity price volatility, as Shiller did not consider such regime shifts.
plausible that uncertainty shocks played a role in these declines. This paper examines the historical record of this period to outline a series of events that are candidates for uncertainty shocks, and then matches these events to change in stock returns and stock volatility, as predicted by the theory of investment under uncertainty.

2 Bipower variation

While a Gaussian distribution roughly matches the distribution of stock returns in the data, the distribution of stock returns for the Dow Jones Industrial Average for 1896-2013 deviates significantly from a normal distribution. There remain “fat tails,” where the frequency of very large negative downward changes (and to some extent upward changes) in stock returns is larger than would be predicted with a normal distribution. One can see this in Figures 6 and 7, which show the actual path of stock volatility, and a series of simulated stock volatility for the entire sample and for the 1929-1941 period. The simulation is an artificial series generated with random draws from a normal distribution with the same mean and standard deviation as the actual stock return series. To better model the distribution of stock returns, I will include a series of discontinuous “jumps” which will arrive at a Poisson rate. This jump-diffusion model of stock returns is common in finance, beginning with Merton (1976) and common in models like that of Kou (2002). The 1930s, especially the during the 1929-1933 Great Collapse period, saw many of the largest declines in the Dow Jones Industrial Average, but this period also saw some of the largest gains in Dow history as well. These results are plotted in Figure 1 which shows clearly that this period saw both large downward and upward changes in the stock market.

2.1 Model

To separately identify jumps in the data from large observations of the diffusion part of the data generating process, I use the bipower variation test of Barndorff-Nielsen and Shephard (2006), which identifies jumps in a jump-diffusion time-series. These jump-diffusion processes combine the standard diffusion process with a jump process as follows:
\[
\frac{dP_t}{P_t} = \mu dt + \sigma_t dW + x dZ
\]  

(1)

This continuous-time set-up has \(P\) as stock index level, \(\mu\) as the trend in percent, \(\sigma\) as the standard deviation of changes, and \(x\) as the average size of discrete jumps. \(dW\) is a standard Brownian motion process, with a Gaussian distribution, and \(dZ\) follows a Poisson distribution and has a value of either 0 or 1.

\[
P_t = \rho P_{t-1} + \sigma_t W_t + x Z_t
\]  

(2)

While this model is intuitively appealing and accurate in describing the behavior of stock prices, distinguishing between the diffusion process and the jump process for a given time-series is a non-trivial problem. Aït-Sahalia (2004) and Tauchen and Zhou (2005) outline jump tests, but I will use Barndorff-Nielsen and Shephard’s seminal papers using bipower variation to test for jumps in time-series data (Barndorff-Nielsen and Shephard, 2006; Barndorff-Nielsen et al., 2006). Define \(Y_t\) as the log-price of a stock index, such as the Standard and Poor’s 500. Denote \(Y^c\) as the continuous portion and define \(Y^d\) as the jump term from 2.1. Quadratic Variation (QV) is defined as

\[
[Y]_t = \text{plim} \sum_{j=0}^{n-1} (Y_{t,j+1} - Y_{t,j})^2
\]  

(3)

and it is easy to show that \([Y]_t = [Y^c]_t + [Y^d]_t\), with \([Y^d]_t = \sum_{0 \leq g \leq t} \Delta Y_u^2\), with \(\Delta Y_t\) representing the jumps in \(Y\). The null hypothesis of no jumps is formed by setting \([Y] = [Y^c]\). While the theoretical result are a limiting case of continuous time, my dataset is of discrete data so I will perform the test with daily returns, defined as \(y_t = Y_t - Y_{t-1}\). For daily returns, the bipower variation \([1,1]\) of a time-series over time \(t\) is defined as follows:

\[
Y_t^{[1,1]} = \sum_{j=2}^{t} |y_{j-1}||y_j|
\]  

(4)

Barndorff-Nielsen and Shephard (2004) show that the above expression can be consistently
estimated with

\[ [Y]_t - (\mu^{-2})Y^{[1,1]}_t, \]

where \( \mu = \sqrt{\frac{2}{\pi}} \). The above expression is simply the difference between the bipower variation and the quadratic variation, and will provide the basis for the BNS difference test.

To test for the presence of jumps in a time series, an estimator of integrated quarticity \( \int_0^t \sigma^4_\mu du \) is required. BNS propose quadpower variation, which is defined as follows:

\[ Y^{[1,1,1,1]}_t = \sum_{j=4}^{t} |y_{j-3}| |y_{j-2}| |y_{j-1}| |y_j| \]  

(5)

The BNS difference test statistic has the following asymptotic distribution for daily returns.\(^4\)

\[ \hat{D} = \frac{(\mu^{-2}\{Y\}^{[1,1]}_t - [Y]_t)}{\sqrt{\theta \mu^{-4}\{Y\}^{[1,1,1,1]}_t}} \rightarrow^L N(0, 1) \]  

(6)

There is also a ratio test that measures the ratio of quadratic variation to bipower variation.

\[ \frac{\{Y\}^{[1,1]}_t}{\sqrt{\theta \{Y\}^{[1,1]}_t}} \left( \frac{\mu^{-2}\{Y\}^{[1,1]}_t}{[Y]_t} - 1 \right) \rightarrow^L N(0, 1) \]  

(7)

I display the bipower and quadratic variation measure for 1896-2013 in Figure 8 and for just the Depression period in Figure 9. One can see that the quadratic variation measure is generally larger than the bipower variation measure, especially when the former is larger. I use the BNS difference test to determine jumps, so the difference between quadratic and bipower variation is plotted for the entire period in Figure 10, where the Depression period clearly appears as a period of significant and persistent jumps.

2.2 Results

I perform both the BNS difference test as well as the BNS ratio test using daily return data from the Dow Jones Industrial Average from 1896-2013.\(^5\) The tests yield very small p-values, so I can

\(^4\) \theta = (\pi^2/4) + \pi - 5

\(^5\) I have removed the observations from the closure of the NYSE during World War 1 and for the 1987 October Crash as these are outliers
reject the null hypothesis of no jumps in the series for both the entire sample of 1896-2013 as well as the 1929-1941 Great Depression period. For the BNS difference test, I obtain a Z-value of -6.43 for the entire period, and -3.22 for the Great Depression, with both p-values significant at the 0.1% level. For the BNS ratio test, I obtain a Z-value of -3.22 for the entire sample and a Z-value of -2.82 for the Great Depression, with both tests rejecting at a 1% level. Thus the BNS tests clearly point to the existence of jumps. Bloom (2009) also performs the BNS difference and ratio tests, and finds support for jumps in return for the postwar as I do for the interwar period. I also display in Figure 11 the percent of the month that features “high jumps,” which I define to be in the 95th percentile of higher of jumps over the entire period. It is easy to see that the period with many jumps is also the period when stock volatility is high, which is consistent with the uncertainty hypothesis where stock prices should exhibit large returns jumps and high stock volatility during uncertainty periods.

3 Uncertainty Shocks: 1929-1941

Bloom (2009) points to major uncertainty shock events in the post-war era where coincided with major stock volatility and significant uncertainty such as the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of JFK, the Gulf War, the Asian Financial Crisis, 9/11, and the 2008 financial crisis. I construct a similar timeline of Depression uncertainty shock events. I also discuss briefly competing theories and how uncertainty can be seen as a channel through which events like banking failures and the gold standard can affect the broader economy. Concurrently major theories of the Depression are mentioned for each phase of the Great Depression, which is split into relevant phases. All the events are listed in 2 with a corresponding classification of the uncertainty shock type.

3.1 Prelude and Early Stages

The roots of the crisis of 1929 can be found in the economic and asset boom that preceded the crash. In order to combat stock market speculation and a stock market bubble, the Federal Reserve raised discount rates to combat excessive purchases of stock on margin and to prevent the economy from overheating (Eichengreen, 1996). This tightening was felt first not in the United States where
it originated, but instead in countries most sensitive to transmission of the credit channel. These countries included agricultural exporters in Latin America and Eastern Europe, as well as Germany which suffered from both tighter credit conditions and higher interest rates on its reparations debt (Kindleberger, 1986). The United States eventually did experience a mild downturn, as the peak of industrial production and the official start of the recession can be dated to the summer of 1929.\footnote{While the stock market crash looms large in popular accounts of the Depression, it is clear that the Great Crash occurred with a recession already underway.}

Up to this point, I see no role for uncertainty as an explanatory factor in the nascent disaster. Monetary tightening, as outlined in Hamilton (1987), is sufficient to explain the mild decline in economic activity.

Likely due to the unsustainable rise of securities prices between 1928-1929, stocks crashed significantly in October 1929 in one the largest financial routs in American history, and the character of the downturn changed significantly. However, while the recession seemed to be mild to observers at the time, the Great Crash of 1929 would fundamentally change the nature of the downturn, as Friedman and Schwartz argue: “During the two months from August 1929 to the crash, production, wholesale prices, and personal income fell at annual rates of 20 per cent, 7.5 per cent, and 5 per cent, by October respectively. In the next twelve months, all three series fell at appreciably higher rates: 27 per cent, 13.5 per cent, and 17 per cent, respectively. All told, by October 1930, production had fallen 26 per cent, prices, 14 per cent, and personal income, 16 per cent. ... Even if the contraction had come to an end in late 1930 or early 1931, as it might have done in the absence of the monetary collapse that was to ensue, it would have ranked as one of the most severe contractions on record.” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p. 306)

Friedman and Schwartz are well known for their monetarist explanation for the Great Depression. But uncertainty also plays a central role in their theory of the Depression. Friedman and Schwartz also argue, as Romer does, that uncertainty was a direct result of the Great Crash of 1929. “Partly, no doubt, the stock market crash was a symptom of the underlying forces making for a severe contraction in economic activity. But partly also, its occurrence must have helped to deepen the contraction. It changed the atmosphere within which businessmen and others were making their plans, and spread uncertainty where dazzling hopes of a new era had prevailed. It is
commonly believed that it reduced the willingness of both consumers and business enterprises to spend, ...” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p.306). Romer (1990) examined contemporary business forecaster which became markedly more uncertain after the Crash. While monetary factors were likely another trigger of the price collapse, the Great Crash generated a sense of uncertainty among businesses and consumers. The Stock Crash itself was a major uncertainty event, but a pervasive sense of uncertainty would not set in until the banking crises of later years. After October 1929 stock volatility and return jumps fall significant, so that these uncertainty measures are low by early 1930.

3.2 Great Contraction: 1930-1933

3.2.1 Banking Failures

Wicker (2001) identifies 4 major periods of banking crises which largely line up with the banking crises of Friedman and Schwartz (1971). These banking crises took place from November-December 1930, April-August 1931, September-October 1931, and June-July 1932.\(^7\) It is intuitive that large scale bank failures would reduce confidence about the future. Bank runs and uncertainty about whether one’s life savings will be safe could only add to existing uncertainty. Friedman and Schwartz argued that the increase in uncertainty in the 1930s could explain the decline in monetary velocity. In this theory, economic agents would hold money due to a “precautionary savings” effect, which is quite similar to a real-option effect due to uncertainty at the firm level. “Other things being the same, it is highly plausible that the fraction of their assets individuals and business enterprises wish to hold in the form of money, and also in the form of close substitutes for money, will be smaller when they look forward to a period of stable economic conditions than when they anticipate disturbed and uncertain conditions. ... The more uncertain the future, the greater the value of such flexibility and hence the greater the demand for money is likely to be.” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p. 673)

Thus we have another channel whereby uncertainty can reduce aggregate demand, through a monetary channel in this case. “The contraction instilled instead an exaggerated fear of continued

\(^7\)A fifth crisis from February-March 1933 was considered somewhat differently by Wicker as there were no banking failures due to the bank holiday.
economic instability, of the danger of stagnation, of the possibility of recurrent unemployment. The result, from this point of view, was a sharp increase in the demand for money, accounting for the magnitude of the decline in velocity from 1929 to 1932.” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p.673) Cole and Ohanian (2001) finds that the banking collapse was not a major factor in the decline of output from 1929-1933, as only 0.4% of banking deposits were lost from 1930-1932, which was a similar ratio as for the 1920-1921 recession. Also, Cole and Ohanian (2001) are not able to generate a significant decline in output as a result of banking failures from their general equilibrium model. However, while the direct effect of these banking failures may be as large as previously thought, the uncertainty effect of banking failures of household behavior could still be significant, as uncertainty over potential banking failures caused households to pull their money out of banks and reduced monetary velocity. Thus the Friedman-Schwartz monetary hypothesis can be seen through an uncertainty lens, as the sharp decline in velocity is due, in large part, to these uncertainty shocks. Both jumps and stock volatility are large and persistent during these periods, confirming the uncertainty effect of the rampant banking failures.

3.2.2 Smoot-Hawley tariff

While tariffs did rise astronomically in the wake of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, the direct impact was clearly too small to matter in the Great Depression (Eichengreen, 1988). However, this tariff could have a significant uncertainty effect even if the level effect was small. Archibald and Feldman (1998) argue that uncertainty surrounding the Smoot-Hawley tariff adversely affected the American economy. Indeed, there is a spike in stock volatility during June 1930 when the Smoot Hawley tariff was signed into law. Also, the extent of retaliation with American trading partners was uncertain: Would other countries raise tariffs on American products? Canadian tariffs rose significantly over this period in retaliation. Elsewhere nominal tariffs rose quickly, and volatile and unpredictable deflation made real tariff rates uncertain (Hamilton, 1992). While the Smoot-Hawley tariff was not a large uncertainty event, it is plausible that this policy change increased uncertainty.
3.2.3 Gold Standard

While in hindsight it is now clear that the end of the gold standard was needed for recovery (Eichengreen, 1996), at the time the “gold standard mentality” was prevalent (Mouré, 2002). Countries experiencing currency attacks might be forced off the gold standard, as the United Kingdom was in September 1931. We can see in Figure 4 that volatility spikes on this date. It was unclear whether the British departure would drive the United States off of gold as well, due to gold outflows to England which reduced the money supply and created a small financial and banking crisis in the United States. In response the Fed raised interest rates to preserve the gold standard, though of course this further reduced aggregate demand. Ferderer and Zalewski (1999) find that uncertainty propagated the Great Depression as doubts about a country’s commitment of the gold standard lead to interest rate volatility, which then caused output declines. This channel could clearly be operative in this case as well, so there are several ways that uncertainty could generate output declines in this period.

3.2.4 Political Threats

The Great Depression brought widespread hunger and unemployment, so it is perhaps unsurprising that support for radical policies grew. A Roman Catholic priest, James Cox, led 25,000 unemployed Pennsylvanians on a march on Washington in January 1932 to push for increased relief for the unemployed and stronger labor unions. This was a prelude for the much larger Bonus army marches of the spring and summer. Veterans of World War I were promised, through 1924 legislation, a Veteran’s Bonus to be paid in 1945. Widespread unemployment and poverty among veterans during the 1930s drove a push by veterans’ groups for the Bonus to be paid early, and some 17,000 veterans and their families went to Washington to lobby the government. Media reports reported that the veterans groups were largely composed of communists and criminals. General MacArthur saw the marchers as revolutionaries intent on overthrowing the Republic, a sentiment to which Patrick J. Hurley, the Secretary of War, enthusiastically agreed (Lisio, 1967).

While these sentiments may have been overblown, the perceived probability of violence and radicalism among well-trained veterans in the heart of the nation’s capital could not but generate
a sense of uncertainty. Figure 4 show the major events of the Bonus army, culminating in the July 28th eviction of the Bonus Army. This eviction began with two marchers being killed by police. As the crisis intensified, MacArthur commanded a tank column, ordering a cavalry charge and infantry armed with bayonet and vomiting gas disbursing the veterans (Dickson and Allen, 2006).\(^8\)

### 3.3 1933

Uncertainty resulting from the gold standard’s future was discussed in the context of the British departure from gold in 1931. Friedman and Schwartz also discussed the significant rise in uncertainty in 1933 regarding the status of the gold standard in the United States under a Roosevelt administration: “The rumors about gold were only one part of the general uncertainty during the interregnum about future financial and economic policy. Under ordinary circumstances, it would have been doubtful that such rumors and such uncertainty would be a major force accounting for so dramatic and widespread a financial panic. But these were not ordinary circumstances. The uncertainty came after more than two years of banking difficulties in which one wave of bank failures had followed another and had left the banking system in a particularly vulnerable position. The Federal Reserve itself participated in the general atmosphere of panic. Once the panic started, it fed on itself.” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p.332)

Roosevelt did not have a clear position during the campaign on the status of the gold standard, so naturally there was some uncertainty over his gold standard policies. This uncertainty can be seen during FDR’s inauguration (March 1933), Executive Order 6102 which forced the sale of private gold holdings to the government (April 1933), and the Gold Reserve Act (January 1934) which set gold’s price at $35 an ounce.\(^9\) The gold price floated between March 1933 and January 1934, which is the same period as when stock volatility remains high, so this could be due to lingering uncertainty over the gold standard prior to the repegging of the dollar at the $35 per troy ounce rate. The Gold Reserve Act also set up an Exchange Stabilization Fund which purchased gold in exchange for freshly created money, which put in place a more clearly expansionary monetary

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\(^8\)The veterans would eventually receive their bonus in 1936 when Congress passed a Bonus bill over Roosevelt’s veto.

\(^9\)$35 an ounce would remain the price of gold until the end of the Bretton Woods system in the 1970s.
policy (Wicker, 1971).

For Friedman and Schwartz, monetary policy can work better if it is not impeded by the negative impacts of uncertainty. “After three years of economic contraction, there must have been as many forces in the economy making for revival, and it is reasonable that they could more readily come to fruition in a favorable monetary setting than in the midst of continued financial uncertainty.” (Friedman and Schwartz, 1971, p.324) While this study does not address the interaction between uncertainty and monetary policy effectiveness, Vavra (2013) and Bloom et al. (2007) found monetary policy was less effective during volatile or uncertain times, confirming Friedman and Schwartz’s intuition. This lingering uncertainty at the beginning of the recovery can help explain why recovery was not more rapid given the sharp change in monetary policy from contractionary to expansionary. Other policies, like the NIRA, represented major departures from existing policy and significant interventions in the American economy of the time (Cole and Ohanian, 1999).

3.4 After 1933

The 1930s were a time of low support for existing political and economic frameworks. With widespread hunger and unemployment, it is perhaps unsurprising that support for radical policies and actions rose which made business uncertain about its future prospects. Merton (1985) also argues that there was significant uncertainty about the future of capitalism: “With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the U.S. and world economies came out of the Depression quite well. At the time, however, investors could not have had such confident expectations.”

The Roosevelt administration was well aware of the threats of upheaval they faced. FDR remarked to John Nance Garner, his vice-president, on the way to his inauguration: “I had better be a good president or I will be the last one” (Cowley, 1981, 152) Other observers thought along similar lines: “Before March 4th, America was in a state of extreme shock. No one would ever know, General Hugh S Johnson later said, “how close were we to collapse and revolution. We could have got a dictator a lot easier than Germany got Hitler.” “I do not think it is to much to say,” wrote Tugwell, “that on March 4

10 cited in Voth (2002)[2]
[FDR’s inauguration] we were confronted with a choice between an orderly revolution- a peaceful and rapid departure from past concepts- and a violent and disorderly overthrow of the whole capitalist structure.” (Schlesinger, 2003a, 22) This was not idle speculation. General Smedley Butler, who had been active with the Bonus Army, would later be approached by a group of executives and conservatives opposed to Roosevelt. The “Business Plot” was to have Butler lead a veterans’ group in overthrowing Roosevelt and imposing a fascist government more favorable to government. While this plan was largely ridiculed at the time and even today, when Butler testified in 1934, an official government investigation found these allegations to be true (Schlesinger, 2003b). While it is difficult to point to specific events where the possibility of regime change was more salient, stock volatility and return jumps are high during the period 1929-1934 when this uncertainty was more salient, and after 1934 when recovery was taking hold and support for existing political and economic structures rose, uncertainty fell as well.

3.4.1 New Deal Uncertainty

Criticism of Roosevelt was prevalent in the 1930s, as the election of 1932 brought into power an executive and legislative branch that was highly supported of an expanded role of government in the economy. This unprecedented government intervention in the economy was opposed by critics, who formed the “Old Right”, as moves towards socialism or fascism (Hoover, 1952). These critics saw the New Deal as a major driver of political uncertainty, to the detriment of the broader economy. “Where political uncertainty is the rule,” Merle Thorpe wrote in Nation’s Business, “businessmen cannot make long-term contracts; they cannot plan ahead; they cannot expand” (Schlesinger, 2003a, 475) Schumpeter argued that major legislative changes caused uncertainty about the path and effects of government policy. “The subnormal recovery to 1935, the subnormal prosperity to 1937 and the slump after that are easily accounted for by the difficulties incident to the adaptation to a new fiscal policy, new labor legislation and a general change in the attitude of government to private enterprise all of which can be distinguished from the working of the productive apparatus as such. So extensive and rapid a change of the social scene naturally affects productive performance for a time, and so much the most ardent New Dealer must and also can admit. I for one do not
see how it would otherwise be possible to account for the fact that this country which had the best chance of recovering quickly was precisely the one to experience the most unsatisfactory recovery.” (Schumpeter, [1942] 1994, pp. 6465, emphasis is Schumpeter’s) This “regime uncertainty” argument has continued to influence modern scholars. Higgs (1997) argues that the uncertainty regarding private property rights during the Roosevelt administration explains the weak investment seen during the 1930s. As policies were unclear, business did not want to invest given the uncertain future. This is similar to the real-options effect discussed earlier. Higgs lists some events that could have provided uncertainty, but this seems to be simply a list of New Deal policies and does not identify more or less important policies. I will focus on major New Deal legislation that had significant implication for the economy, to see if these events acted as uncertainty shocks.  

The first set of polices was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which put in place the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in June 1933. This allowed business to collude and set minimum standards for wages and prices. Thousands of pages of codes were printed to regulate almost all aspects of business. Adding to the uncertainty was doubt over the constitutionality of the bill, which the Supreme Court decided in 1935 to be unconstitutional. The ruling of the NIRA unconstitutional on May 27, 1935 would seem to return the American economy to a more familiar regulatory framework. If the regime uncertainty hypothesis were correct, uncertainty, as measured by stock volatility, should decrease as the regulatory regime became more certain. However, no change in stock volatility is noticable, though that may be because the NIRA had already stopped being effective months before.

The Wagner Act, which was signed into law on July 5th 1935, was the high tide for union legislation in American history. This Act constrained employer interference in union activities and encouraged collective bargaining and the right to strike. The number of strikes increased dramatically after the passage of this Act, and it seems plausible that this Act could have increased uncertainty in effected industries. The Revenue Act of 1935 also raised taxes significantly, and was called a “Soak the Rich” tax. By February 1937 the United Auto Workers’s Flint strike had

11 Cole and Ohanian (2004) also argue that the New Deal impeded recovery due to its suspension of antitrust laws and support for labor unions, which cartelized output and labor markets. They do not argue for an uncertainty argument specifically, though uncertainty stemming from the New Deal could also be detrimental to economic recovery in a similar fashion.
succeeded and the union was recognized by General Motors, a major coup for the labor movement. The Social Security Act followed soon after the Wagner Act’s passage on August 14, 1935, which was a major expansion of social spending by the federal government and set the stage for vastly higher tax rates. In June 1936 an Undistributed Profits Tax was imposed, which encouraged businesses to distributed profits as dividends instead of retained earnings. By reducing undistributed profits, this tax made bankruptcy much more likely for firms in trouble as they had fewer cash reserves (Hendricks, 1936). In his fireside chat of March 9, 1937 Roosevelt attempted to “pack” the Supreme Court by adding more judges to the court. This was intended to reverse the anti-New Deal rulings the Court had been steadily issuing. This was ultimately unsuccessful, though the attempt was seen as overreach by the executive.

All these events are shown in Figure 5. Other than the NIRA’s passage none of these events line up with high volatility and jumps, which was vastly reduced from the volatile period of 1929-1934. While policy uncertainty could absolutely create uncertainty shocks, the evidence doesn’t show that policy uncertainty played a large role in the weak recovery. Uncertainty was falling while real GDP growth was at record levels for peacetime when the New Deal was in place, as pointed out by Eggertsson (2010, p.203). Romer (1992) argues that the recovery is not slow, as GDP growth rates were at a record for peacetime. Also, the focus on the potential for an even stronger recovery seems misplaced, as the economy effectively reached its trough in March 1933 when FDR was inaugurated, and record declines in GDP were replaced with record GDP growth rates for peacetime.

### 3.4.2 Monetary Uncertainty and Certainty

It is clear that the devaluation of the dollar in 1933 was enormously beneficial to the American economy. The devaluation increased the value of the monetary gold stock, encouraged an inflow of gold from abroad, and caused the price level to shoot up. Romer (1992) finds that the loose monetary policy alone essentially explains the recovery from the Great Depression. Temin and Wigmore (1990) frame this as a major regime change with significant positive consequences. Eggertsson (2008) argues that the devaluation fundamentally changed agents’ expectations from deflationary to inflationary, due to both the devaluation and FDR’s commitment to reflate the price level back
to its 1926 level. According to Eggertson, the administration made this commitment credible by increasing real and nominal spending. Indeed, price-level targeting is a “fool-proof” way to exit a liquidity trap according to Svensson (2001), and the American economy did rapidly exit the liquidity trap after this regime change. While I agree with Eggertson’s analysis, this policy change had an effect beyond the direct monetary effect. The more important effect was that the credibility and commitment of the expansionary policies vastly reduced uncertainty about future demand and profitability. Both measures of uncertainty shocks, stock volatility and jumps, fell rapidly to more moderate levels from 1933-1937, after being high during the period when monetary policy was uncertain.

3.5 1937-1941

3.5.1 Monetary Uncertainty

The recovery of the 30s was not unbroken, as the American economy suffered a second recession between the summer of 1937 and the summer of 1938. The monetarist argument of Friedman and Schwartz (1971) holds that monetary policy switched from being expansionary to being sharply contractionary in 1936-1937 due to a misplaced fear of inflation and that this policy change caused the 1937-1938 recession. Keynesian critics like Telser (2001) argue that, as the United States was at the zero lower bound, the banking system had significant excess reserves. This meant that increased reserve requirements could be met easily by banks out of excess reserves without restricting lending. Calomiris et al. (2011) find support for this proposition, while Cargill and Mayer (2006) find otherwise. Eggertsson and Pugsley (2006) argue that there is scope for monetary policy through a non-reserve channel, though they do cite the change in reserve policy and other policies like the Treasury’s sterilization of gold as contributing to the downturn. For Eggertsson and Pugsley, FDR had a clear policy of reflation and price-level targeting at the 1926 price level from 1933-1937. In 1937, FDR was convinced by his advisors that the economy was near recovery. Due to this belief and an inflation rate that was creeping higher, FDR’s administration abandoned its commitment to reflation and left policy vague and unclear. By 1938, the administration reversed its stance, and committed itself to its previous policy of reflation and price-level targeting at the 1926 price-level.
These policy changes, based on dates outlined in Eggertsson and Pugsley (2006), show that policy changes that left policy unclear are associated with return jumps and volatility, while changes in policy that were clearly expansionary and more certain in 1938, are associated with lower volatility.

### 3.5.2 War Jitters

While the 1937 recession was likely sparked by monetary policy changes and associated monetary uncertainty, events in 1937 through 1939 related to the prospect of war in Europe and in the Pacific also generated heightened uncertainty in this period. In retrospect, it may seem that the prospect of war would have been welcome given the record GDP growth of the war years to come. The American economy did experience an economic boom in the late 1910s, especially in agriculture bolstered by agricultural exports. However, this boom led to a postwar surge in inflation and ultimately the painful recession of 1920-1921. Sentiment was strongly opposed to foreign entanglements in the 1920s and 1930s, showing that the war was not seen fondly (Lowenthal, 1981). Attacks on American shipping had been one of the triggers for the American declaration of war in 1917, and the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s made the prospects for international trade during the war quite dire. Even if the United States remained neutral during the conflict, it could find itself cut off from export markets. The Neutrality Act of 1937 extended the existing embargo on arms to any warring nations and extending the prohibitions to exclude belligerent ships from U.S. ports. Any trade in non-military material could only occur on a “cash-and-carry” basis, which meant payment had to take place immediately in cash. Any loans to or security exchange with belligerents was also banned (Fellmeth, 1996).

Roosevelt had followed popular sentiment and publically expressed an aversion to interventionism and supporting neutrality. His famous “I hate war speech” of August 1936 was one of the more forceful examples of this. However, it is clear that he was supportive of the British side and wishes to intervene in Britain and China’s favor in the case of armed conflict. In September 1937 Japan bombed major Chinese cities like Shanghai and the War in the East began in earnest. In response to this, Roosevelt gave his famous “Quarantine Speech” in October 1937. FDR argued

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12 This can be seen as a revealed preference argument.
that "a reign of terror and international lawlessness" by the fascists threatened peaceful nations everywhere. If this violence and war did not stop, other peaceful nations would be forced to act and "Quarantine" this threat. As this was not only a change in policy but an unclear one, observers at the time were not sure what to make of this. While FDR had not officially repudiated neutrality, it was clear that he favored the Allies (Maney, 1998, p. 114). On 12 December 1937, the Japanese airforce bombed and sank the U.S.S. Panay in the Nanking harbor. While Japan claimed this was accidental, American flags were clearly visible to Japanese pilots. Later research has found that the attack was order by hardline elements of the Japanese to bring the U.S. officially into the war so that American interests could be expelled from China (Perry, 1969).

Conditions in Europe were worsening by 1937 and 1938 as well. In March 11th and 12th, 1938, German soldiers invaded and annexed Austria into the Reich in the Anschluss. Emboldened by Allied weakness, Hitler immediately demanded the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. As both the USSR and France (and by extension, potentially the United Kingdom) had treaty commitments to defend Czechoslovakia, tensions were high throughout September 1938. This crisis had the possibility to set off a general war in Europe. Tensions remained high through September 1939 when war in Europe began with the invasion of Poland. Stock volatility fell from 1939 through December 1941 when the United States entered the war. This is perhaps because US involvement was fair certain once the United Kingdom entered the war. In any case, rearmament accelerated recovery and provided certain jobs and profits. Gordon and Kremp (2010) finds that fiscal policy contributed to the recovery after 1939 through rearmament, though it is clear that the economy would have recovery eventually through monetary policy alone as shown by Romer (1992).

4 Conclusion

The Great Depression period has been extensively studied by both economists and historians due to its importance as a macroeconomic event and as a watershed in American history. Previous explanations have focused mainly on monetary, fiscal, or policy related explanations for this unprecedented economic crisis. This paper adds to this previous literature by outlining a history of the 1929-1941 period by outlining major plausible uncertainty shocks in this period. Integrating
the well-established connection between stock volatility and uncertainty, and utilizing a Barndorff-Nielsen-Shephard test for bipower variation to identify jumps in returns, this history was connected with economic theory regarding the effect of uncertainty on financial markets. This paper has also made the case that uncertainty shocks can be identified by information from securities markets, and that these uncertainty shocks are concentrated in the recession periods of the 1930s.

Major events that drove uncertainty during the 1929-1933 Great Crash include the Great Crash of 1929 banking crisis of 1930-1933, the Smoot-Hawley tariff, the United Kingdom’s exit from the gold standard, and general political unrest. Uncertainty remained high in 1933 with the major changes of FDR’s hundred days, the National Industrial recovery Act, and the end of the gold standard in the USA. However, the year 1934-1937 saw low uncertainty despite major political changes under the New Deal during the recovery. 1937-1938 saw renewed recession and renewed uncertainty, with monetary policy uncertainty and war jitters dominating. After monetary policy became more certain in 1938, combined with extensive rearmament spending after 1939, saw the U.S. economy recovery rapidly through the beginning of war at the end of 1941. While the spike in uncertainty during the recent financial crisis was short-lived, there remain risks of uncertain shocks in the US and the world economy. A Great Depression was avoided recently due to adequate policy responses, but the recovery remains weak and the effect of the recent uncertainty shock and financial crisis linger on, similarly to the 1930s.


## 5 Appendix

Table 1: Percent Increases or Decreases in Dow Index: 1896-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>3/15/1933</td>
<td>+15.34</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>10/19/1987</td>
<td>−22.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>10/6/1931</td>
<td>+14.87</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>10/28/1929</td>
<td>−12.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>10/31/1929</td>
<td>+12.34</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>10/29/1929</td>
<td>−11.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>9/21/1932</td>
<td>+11.36</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>11/6/1929</td>
<td>−9.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>10/13/2008</td>
<td>+11.08</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>12/18/1899</td>
<td>−8.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>10/28/2008</td>
<td>+10.88</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>8/12/1932</td>
<td>−8.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>10/21/1987</td>
<td>+10.15</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>3/14/1907</td>
<td>−8.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>2/11/1932</td>
<td>+9.47</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>10/15/2008</td>
<td>−7.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>11/14/1929</td>
<td>+9.36</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>7/21/1933</td>
<td>−7.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Overview of the Depression

Great Depression: 1929–1941

Source: Real GDP from NIPA. Price Deflator from BEA. Total Employment from BLS.
Figure 2: Stock Volatility 1896-2013
Figure 3: Stock Volatility 1928-1942

Dow Jones Stock Volatility: 1928-1941
Table 2: Uncertainty Shock Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uncertainty Shock</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of Uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Crash</td>
<td>Oct 1929</td>
<td>Stock Market Crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoot-Hawley</td>
<td>Jun 1930</td>
<td>Large Tariff Increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Banking Crisis</td>
<td>Nov-Dec 1930</td>
<td>Banking Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Banking Crisis</td>
<td>Apr-Aug 1931</td>
<td>Banking Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK Gold Standard Exit</td>
<td>Sep 1931</td>
<td>Gold Standard Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Banking Crisis</td>
<td>Sep-Oct 1931</td>
<td>Banking Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Banking Crisis</td>
<td>Jun-Jul 1932</td>
<td>Banking Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonus Army Crisis</td>
<td>Jul 1932</td>
<td>Political Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDR election</td>
<td>Nov 1932</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Hundred Days</td>
<td>Mar-Jun 1933</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Gold Standard Exit</td>
<td>Mar 1933-Jan 1934</td>
<td>Gold Standard Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Recovery Agency</td>
<td>Jun 1933</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mistake of 1937”</td>
<td>May 1937-Feb 1938</td>
<td>Monetary Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarantine Speech</td>
<td>Oct 1937</td>
<td>War Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panay Incident</td>
<td>Dec 1937</td>
<td>War Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich Agreement</td>
<td>Mar 1938</td>
<td>War Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anschluss</td>
<td>Sep 1938</td>
<td>War Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Uncertainty Shock</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of Uncertainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wagner Act</td>
<td>Jul 1935</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Security Act</td>
<td>Aug 1935</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth Tax</td>
<td>Aug 1935</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undistributed Profits Tax</td>
<td>Mar 1936</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint Sit-Down Strike</td>
<td>Dec 1936-Feb 1937</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FDR Court Packing Plan</td>
<td>Feb-Jul 1937</td>
<td>Policy Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: See text for explanation of uncertainty events and chart for associated stock volatility. Non-uncertainty shocks identified by low stock volatility and uncertainty shock event by high volatility.
Figure 4: Uncertainty Shock Events: 1929-1933

Note: Stock Volatility calculated as standard deviation of log returns of the Dow Jones Industrial Average index. Source: Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Dow Jones
Note: Stock Volatility calculated as standard deviation of log returns of the Dow Jones Industrial Average index. Source: Federal Reserve Board of Governors, Dow Jones
Figure 6: Comparison of Simulated and Actual Returns: Full Sample

Dow Returns: 1896–2013
Simulated and Actual Stock Data

Figure 7: Comparison of Simulated and Actual Returns: Great Depression

Dow Returns: Great Depression
Simulated and Actual Stock Data
Figure 8: Quadratic and Bipower Variation: 1896-2013

Quadratic and Bipower Variation
1896–1986

Figure 9: Quadratic and Bipower Variation: Great Depression

Quadratic and Bipower Variation
Great Depression
Figure 10: Jumps: 1915-1986

Jumps in Returns
1896–1986

Jumps are calculated as the difference between quadratic variation and bipower variation

Figure 11: Jump Percent: 1929-1938

Percent High Jumps
Great Depression

Percent High Jumps is calculated as the fraction of the month with jumps in the 95th percentile or above
References


—, “A Reply to Steven Horwitz’s Commentary on “Great Expectations and the End of the Depression”,” *Econ Journal Watch*, September 2010, 7 (3), 197–204.


