

Economic predictions with big data: The illusion of sparsity

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Predictive modeling with big data

$$y_t = \beta_1 x_{1t} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{kt} + \varepsilon_t, \quad \varepsilon_t \underset{iid}{\sim} \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2)$$

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- Big data: large k

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- Standard inference (ML or flat prior) is not viable
 - Proliferation of parameters
 - High estimation uncertainty
 - Overfitting and imprecise out-of-sample forecasting / poor external validity

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- ➔ Methods to address curse of dimensionality increasingly popular
 - **Sparse** modeling e.g. hand picking, Lasso regression
 - **Dense** modeling e.g. Ridge regression, Factor models

This paper: Sparse or dense modeling?

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- Answer is an empirical matter
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- Answer is an empirical matter
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- Popular techniques not suitable to answer the question
 - Sparsity/density often assumed
 - A small set of predictors might be selected simply to reduce estimation error, even if the model is not sparse

This paper: Sparse or dense modeling?

- Answer is an empirical matter
 - Study a variety of predictive problems in macro, micro and finance

- Our predictive model
 - **sparsity**, without assuming it
 - **shrinkage**, to give a chance to large models
 - Bayesian inference on sparsity and shrinkage

Main results

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- Posterior not concentrated on a single sparse model, but on a wide set

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The illusion of sparsity

Outline

- The predictive model
- Applications to macro, micro and finance
- Sparse or dense modeling?
 - Exploring the posterior

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- Prior

$$\beta_i | \sigma^2, \gamma^2, q \underset{iid}{\sim} \begin{cases} \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 \gamma^2) & \text{with probability } q \\ 0 & \text{with probability } 1 - q \end{cases}$$

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Probability of inclusion, controls **size**

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Variance of prior, controls **shrinkage**

Probability of inclusion, controls **size**

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■ “Spike-and-slab” prior

- Mitchel and Beauchamp (1988)
- Vast literature on Bayesian Model Averaging and Variable Selection

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- This paper: inference on q and γ^2

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$$q \sim \mathcal{B}(a, b)$$

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■ Hyperpriors

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■ Hyperpriors

$$q \sim \mathcal{B}(a, b),$$

$\propto \text{Var}(y_t | q, \gamma^2, \sigma^2)$

$\propto \text{Var}(x'_t \beta | q, \gamma^2, \sigma^2)$

$\frac{q k \text{var}(x) \gamma^2}{q k \text{var}(x) \gamma^2 + 1} \equiv R^2$

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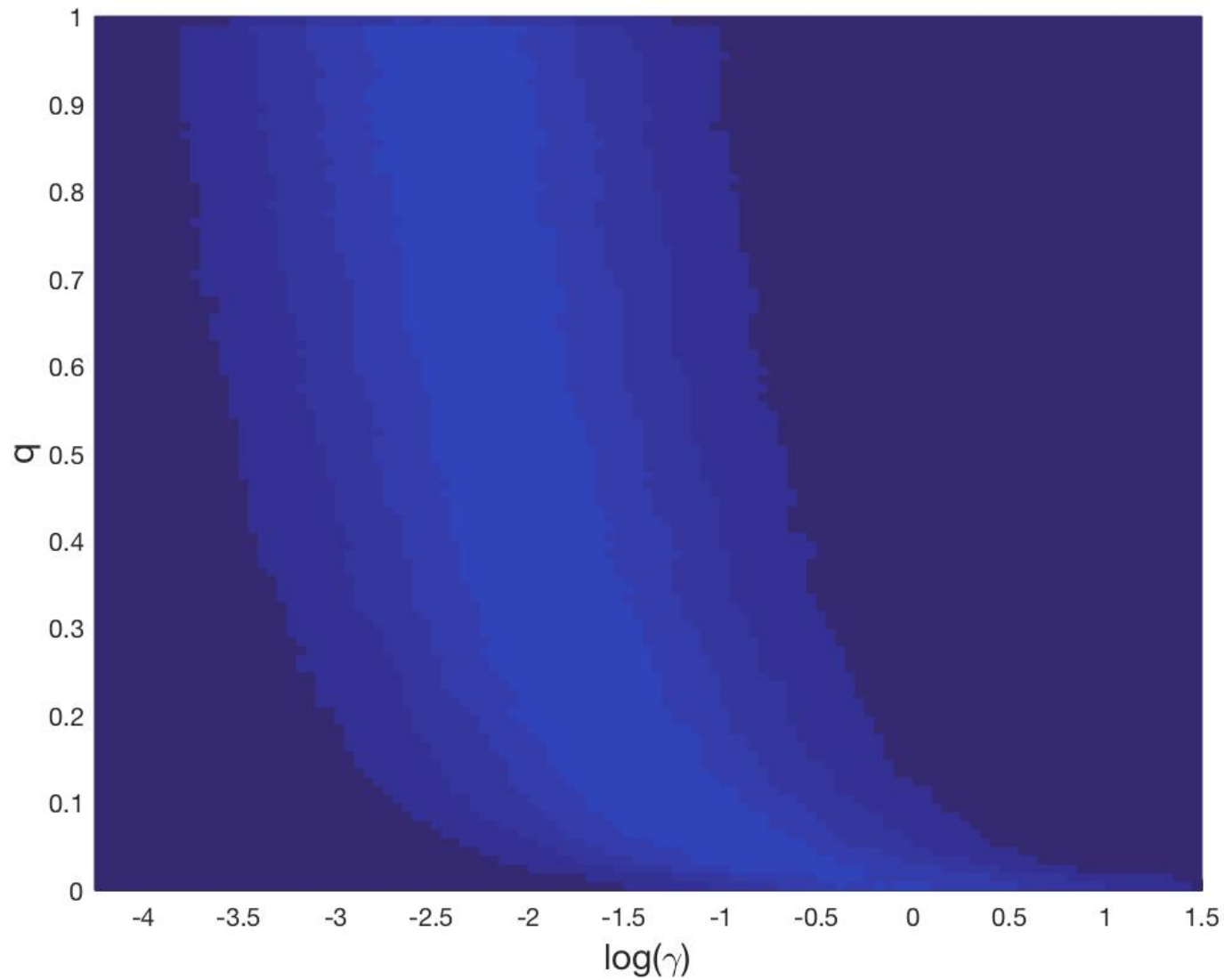
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The implied joint prior on q and γ^2



The prior distribution

- Alternative representation

$$\beta_i | \sigma^2, \gamma^2, q \underset{iid}{\sim} \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 \gamma^2 z_i),$$

$$z_i \underset{iid}{\sim} \text{Bernoulli}(q)$$

- Relation with other popular shrinkage methods

- Ridge regression: $q = 1$

- Lasso regression: $z_i \underset{iid}{\sim} \text{Exponential}$

- Horse shoe prior: $z_i \underset{iid}{\sim} \text{Half Cauchy}$

- None admits a truly sparse representation of with positive probability

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Economic applications

■ Macro

- Forecasting industrial production with many macro predictors
- The determinants of economic growth in a cross-section of countries

■ Finance

- Prediction of the US equity premium over time
- Explaining the cross-section of equity returns across firms

■ Micro

- Understanding the decline in crime rates in US states during the 1990s
- The determinants of government takings of private properties in US judicial circuits

■ Some references:

- Stock-Watson (2002a and b), Barro-Lee (1994), Sala-i-Martin et al. (2004), Welch-Goyal (2008), Freyberger et al. (2017), Donohue-Levitt (2001), Chen-Yeh (2012), Belloni et al. (2011, 2012, 2014).

Economic applications

	Y	X	Sample
Macro 1	Growth rate of US Industrial Prod.	130 lagged macro and financial indicators	659 time-series obs. Feb. 60-Dec. 14
Macro 2	Countries average growth 1960-1985	60 country charact' socio-econ, inst.	90 cross-section obs.
Finance 1	US equity premium	16 lagged macro and financial indicators	58 time-series obs. 1948-2015
Finance 2	Stock returns of US firms	144 dummies lagged characts'	≈1400k panel obs. Jul. 63–Dec. 15, ≈2k firms
Micro 1	Crime rate in US states	285 state characts' socio-econ, inst., law	476 panel obs. Jan. 86–Dec. 97, 48 states
Micro 2	Eminent domain decisions	138 judges' characts' socio-polit., profess	312 panel obs. 1975-2008, circuits

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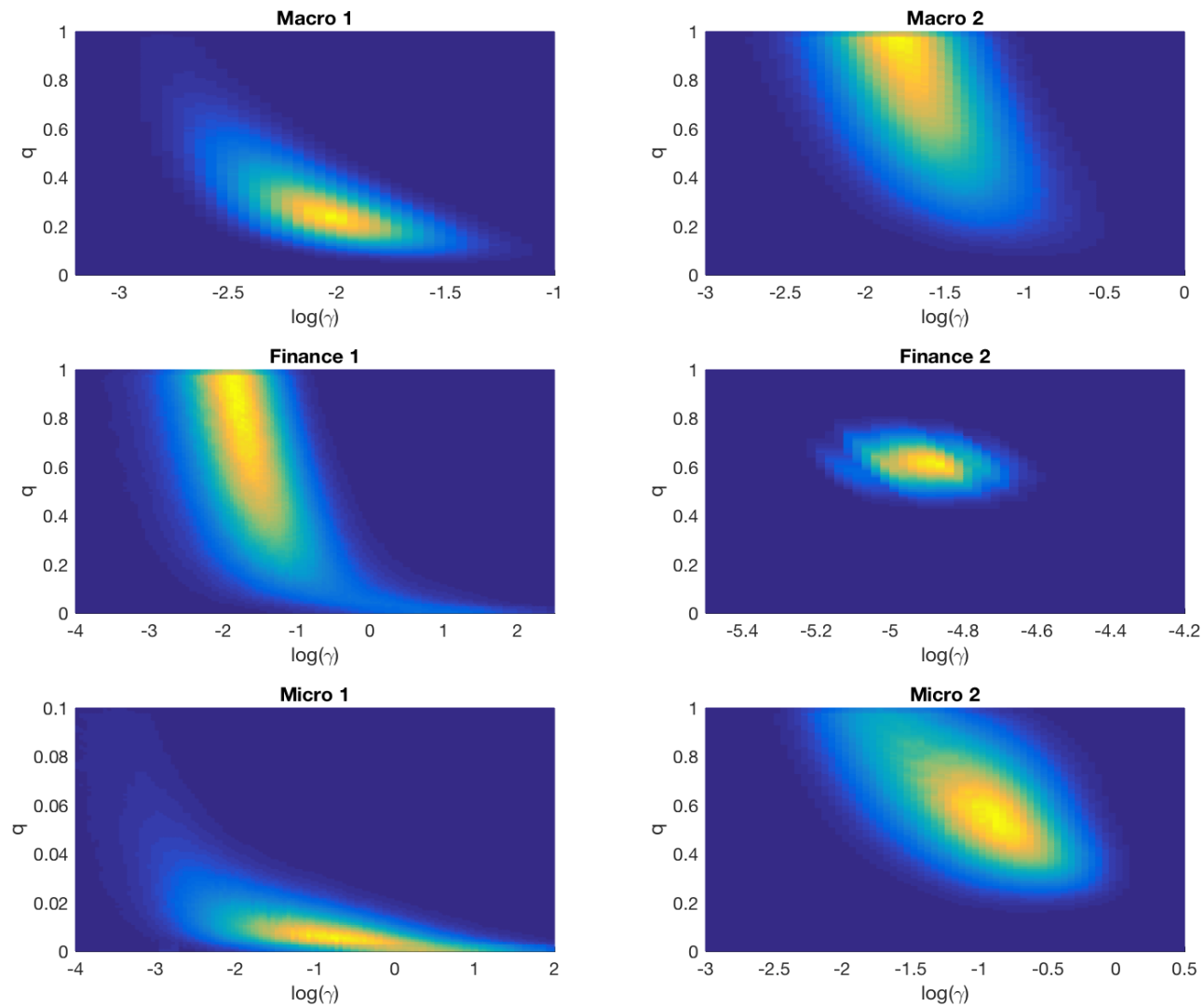
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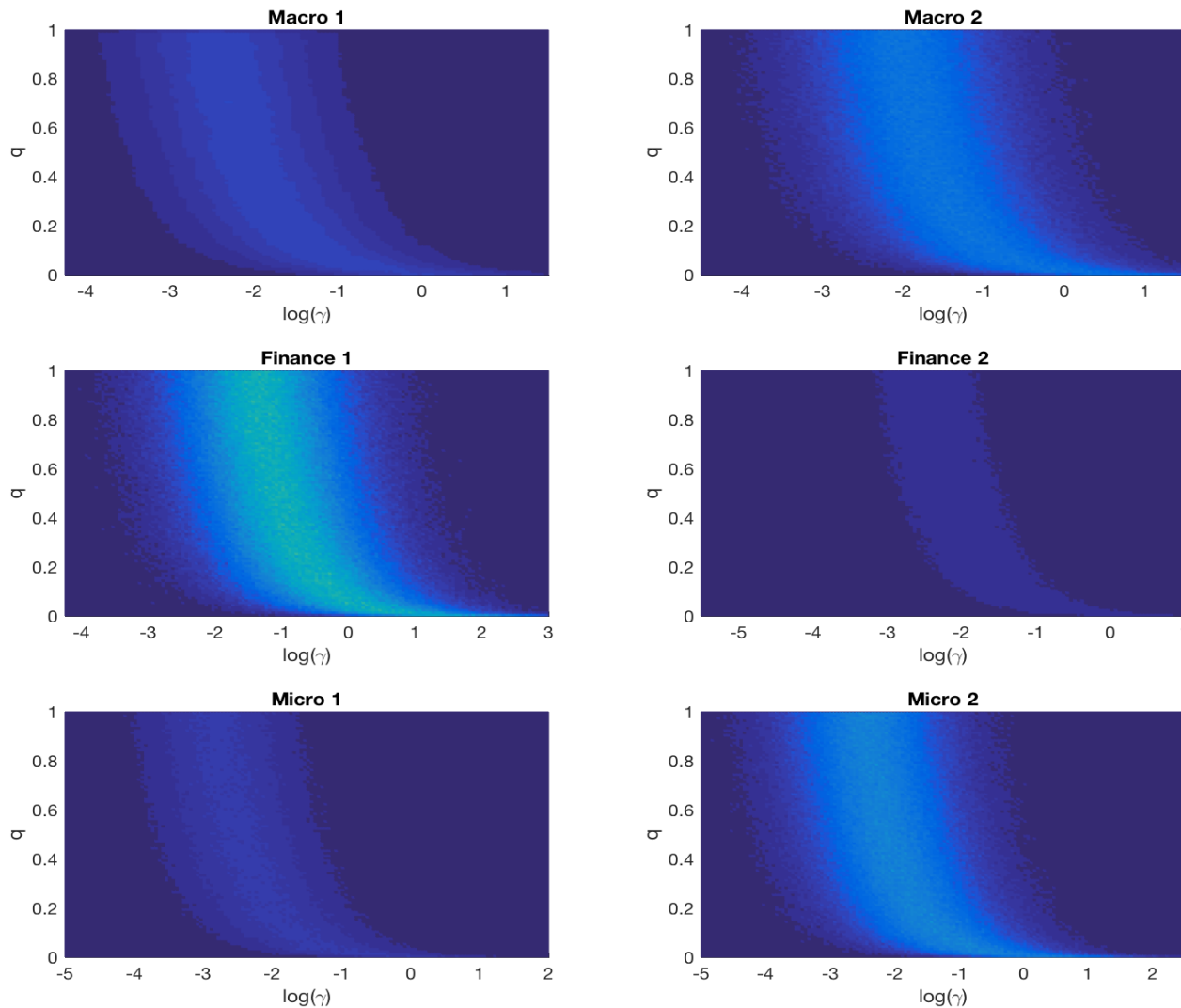
Variance of prior, controls **shrinkage**

Probability of inclusion, controls **size**

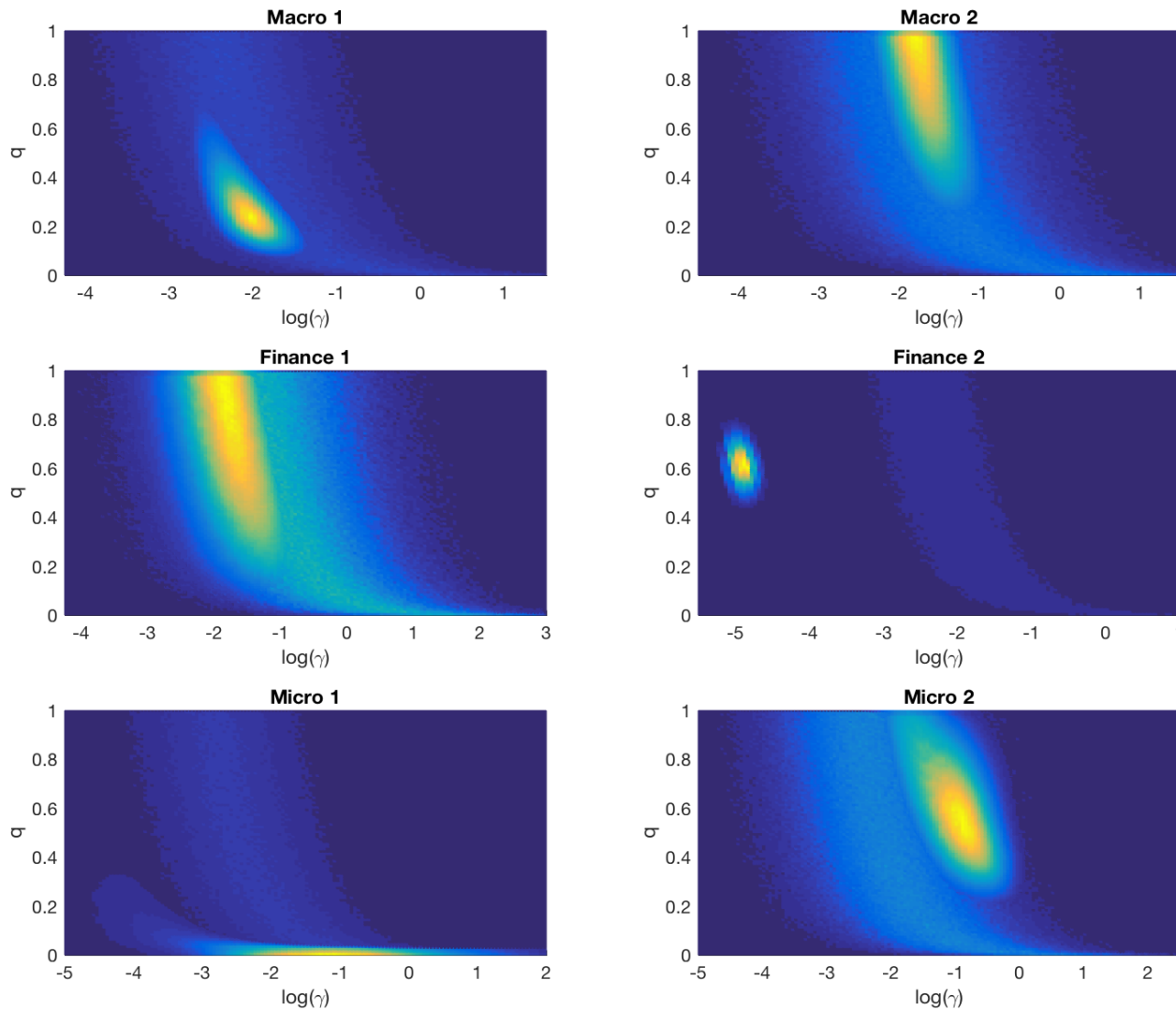
Probability of inclusion and prior variance (q and γ^2)



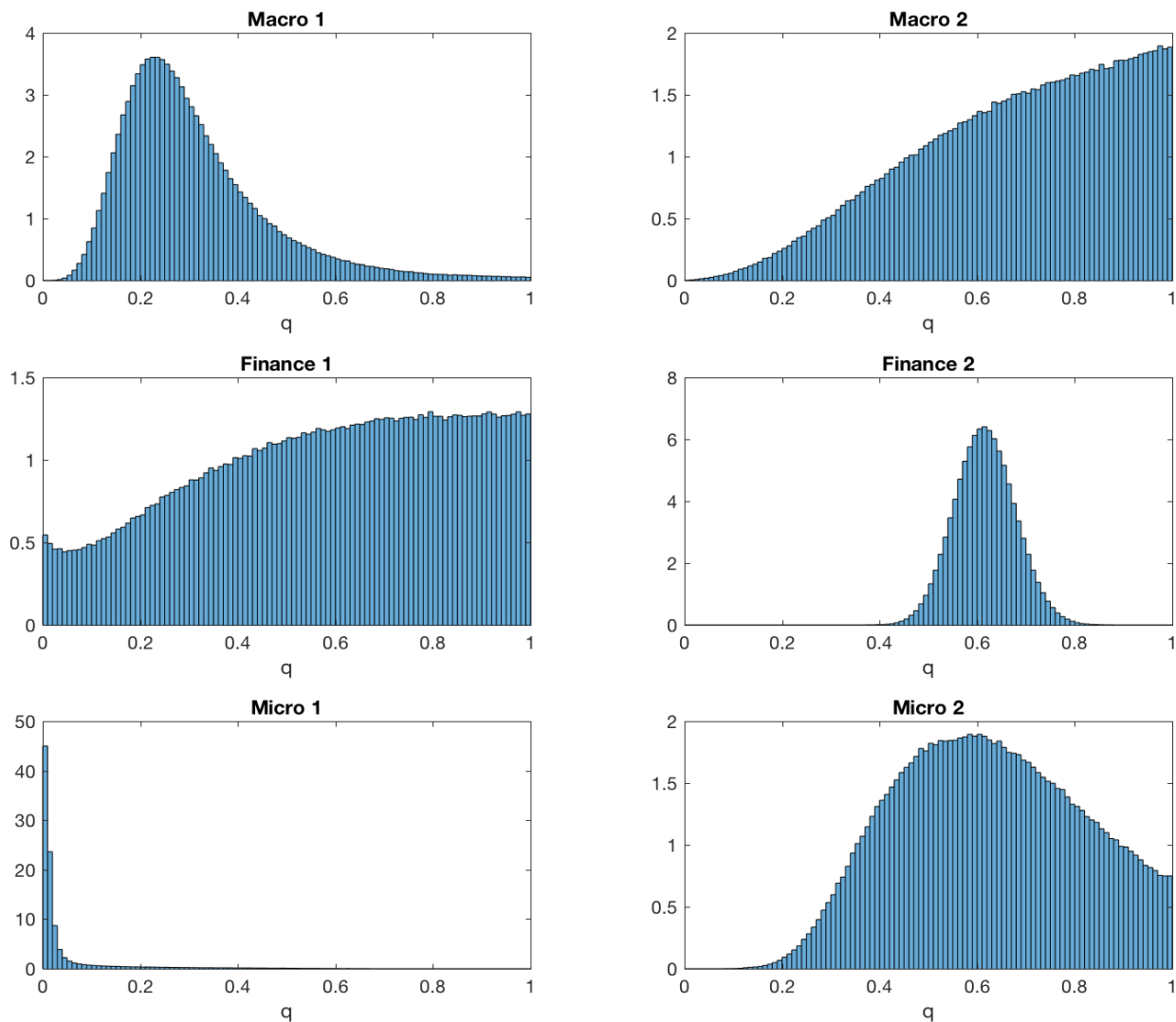
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Probability of inclusion and prior variance (q and γ^2)



Posterior probability of inclusion: $p(q|Y)$



$p(q|Y)$ as a measure of predictive accuracy

- Posterior of q

$$p(q|Y) \propto p(Y|q) \cdot p(q)$$

$p(q|Y)$ as a measure of predictive accuracy

- Posterior of q

$$p(q|Y) \propto p(Y|q)$$

$p(q|Y)$ as a measure of predictive accuracy

- Posterior of q

$$p(q|Y) \propto p(Y|q) = \prod_t^T p(y_t|y^{t-1}, q)$$

$p(q|Y)$ as a measure of predictive accuracy

- Posterior of q

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↑
predictive score

$p(q|Y)$ as a measure of predictive accuracy

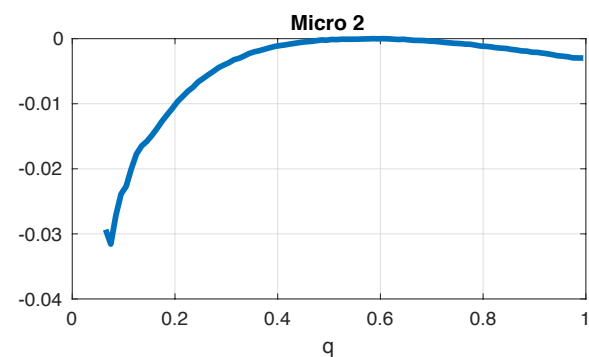
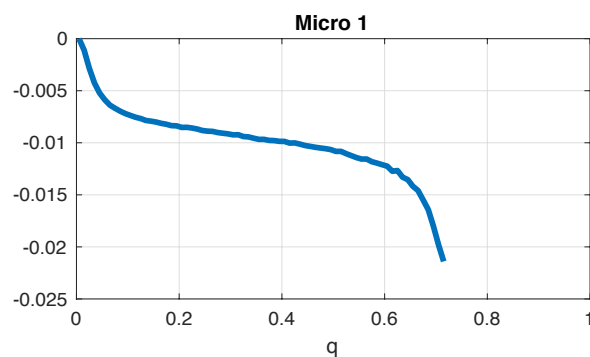
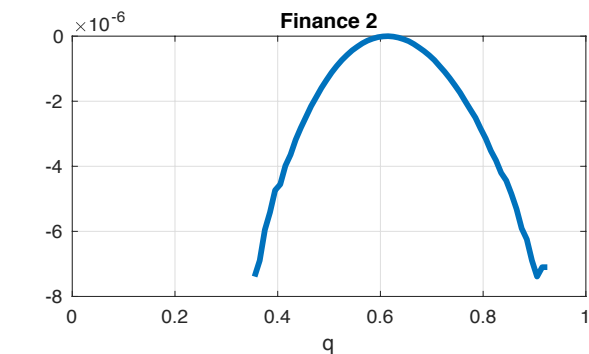
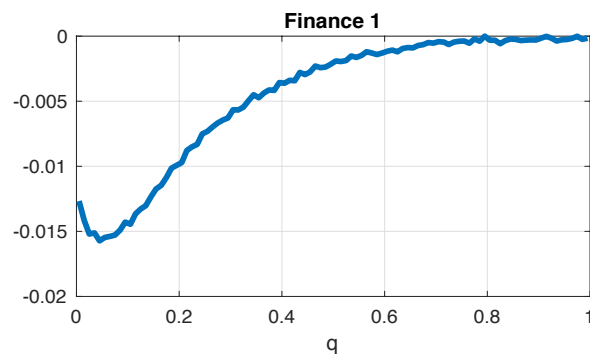
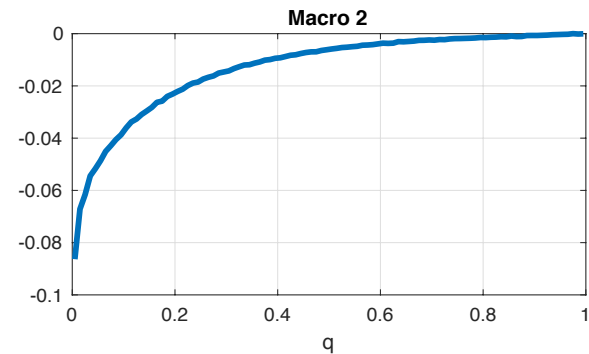
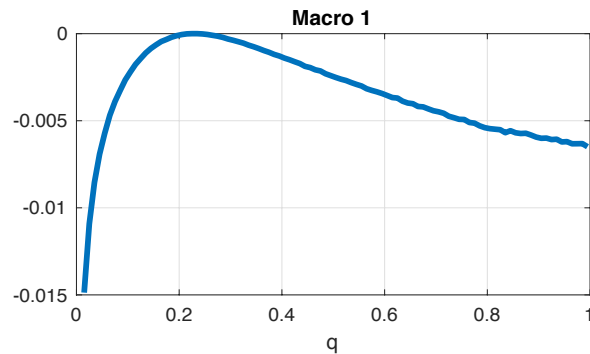
- Posterior of q

$$p(q|Y) \propto p(Y|q) = \prod_t^T p(y_t|y^{t-1}, q)$$

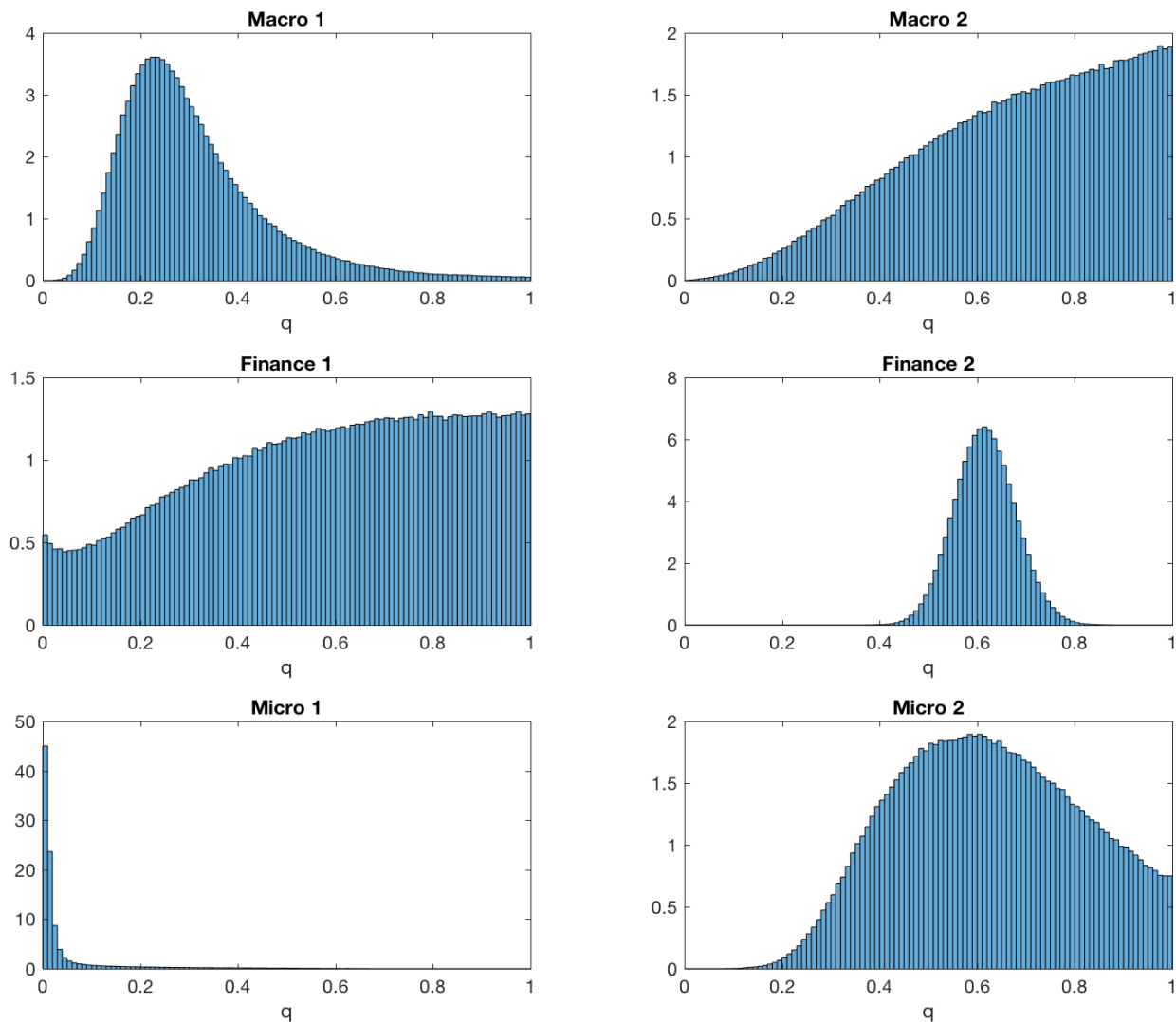
- ➔ Average log-predictive score

$$\frac{1}{T} \sum_t^T \log p(y_t|y^{t-1}, q) = \frac{1}{T} \log p(q|Y) + \text{constant}$$

Average log-predictive score, relative to best fitting model



Posterior probability of inclusion: $p(q|Y)$

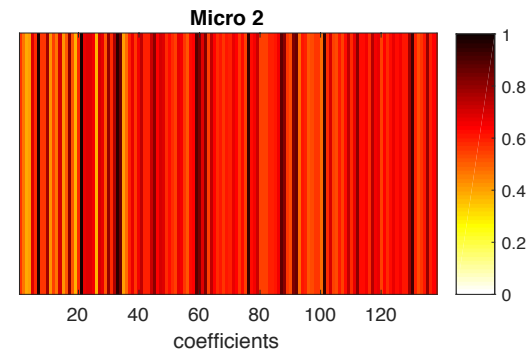
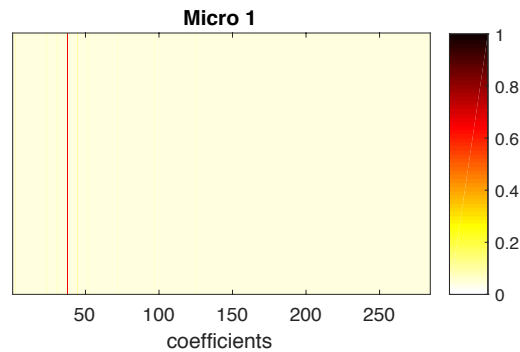
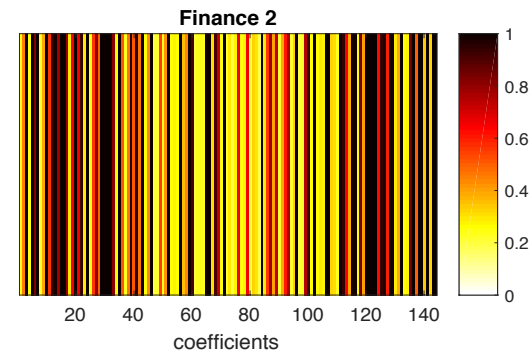
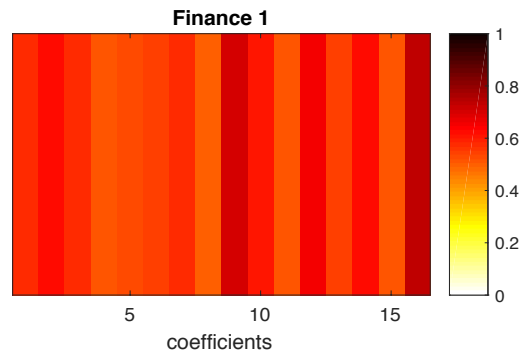
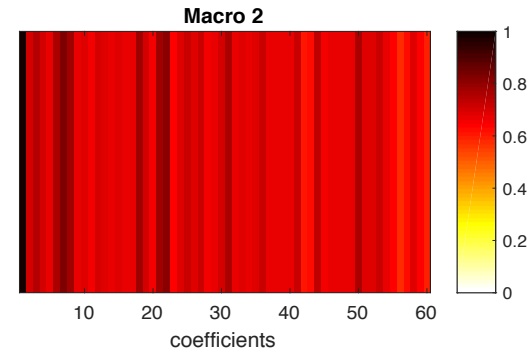
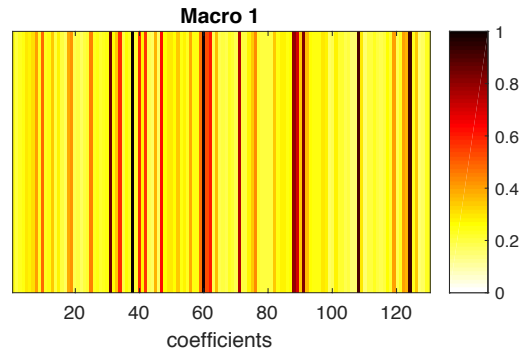


Exploring the posterior

0. Inclusion probability and shrinkage are complements, but imperfect
1. No clear pattern of sparsity
 - Posterior not concentrated on a single sparse model, but on a wide set
2. More sparsity emerges only if very tight prior favoring small models

Patterns of sparsity:

Probability of inclusion of each coefficient



Best predictions with mixture of many models

- Some predictors systematically excluded?
- Predictive density implied by “model q ”

$$p(y_{T+1}|Y, q) = \sum_j p(y_{T+1}|Y, q, m_j) \cdot p(m_j|Y, q)$$

- Mixture of predictive densities of many models

Exploring the posterior

0. Inclusion probability and shrinkage are complements, but imperfect
1. No clear pattern of sparsity
 - Posterior not concentrated on a single sparse model, but on a wide set
 - Predictors rarely systematically excluded
 - Model uncertainty is pervasive
 - Best predictions not with single model, but mixture of many (BMA)
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■ Prior

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■ Hyperpriors

$$q \sim \mathcal{B}(1, \mathbf{1}), \quad \frac{q k \text{var}(x) \gamma^2}{q k \text{var}(x) \gamma^2 + 1} \equiv R^2 \sim \mathcal{B}(1, 1)$$

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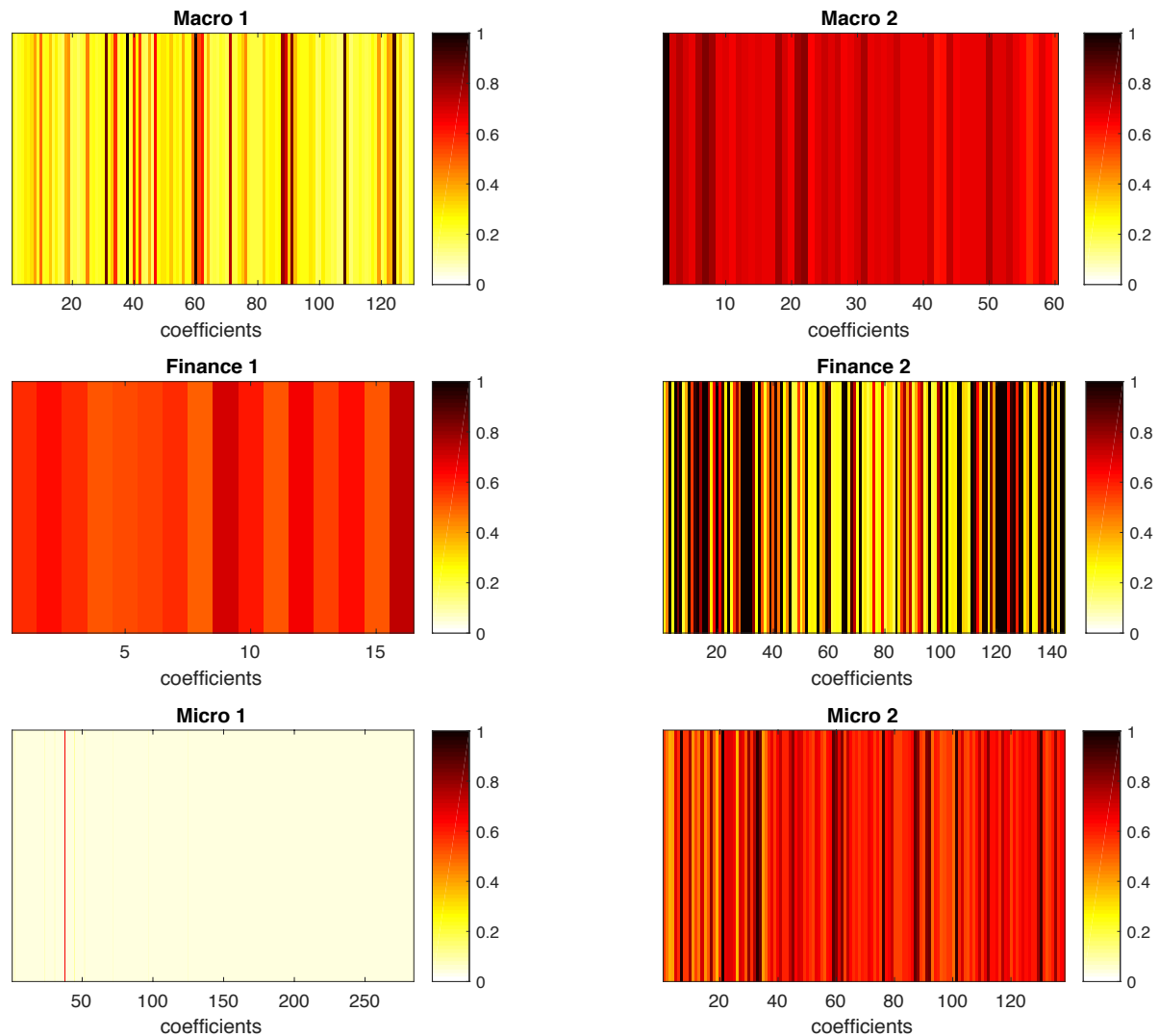
Castillo et al. (2015, Annals)

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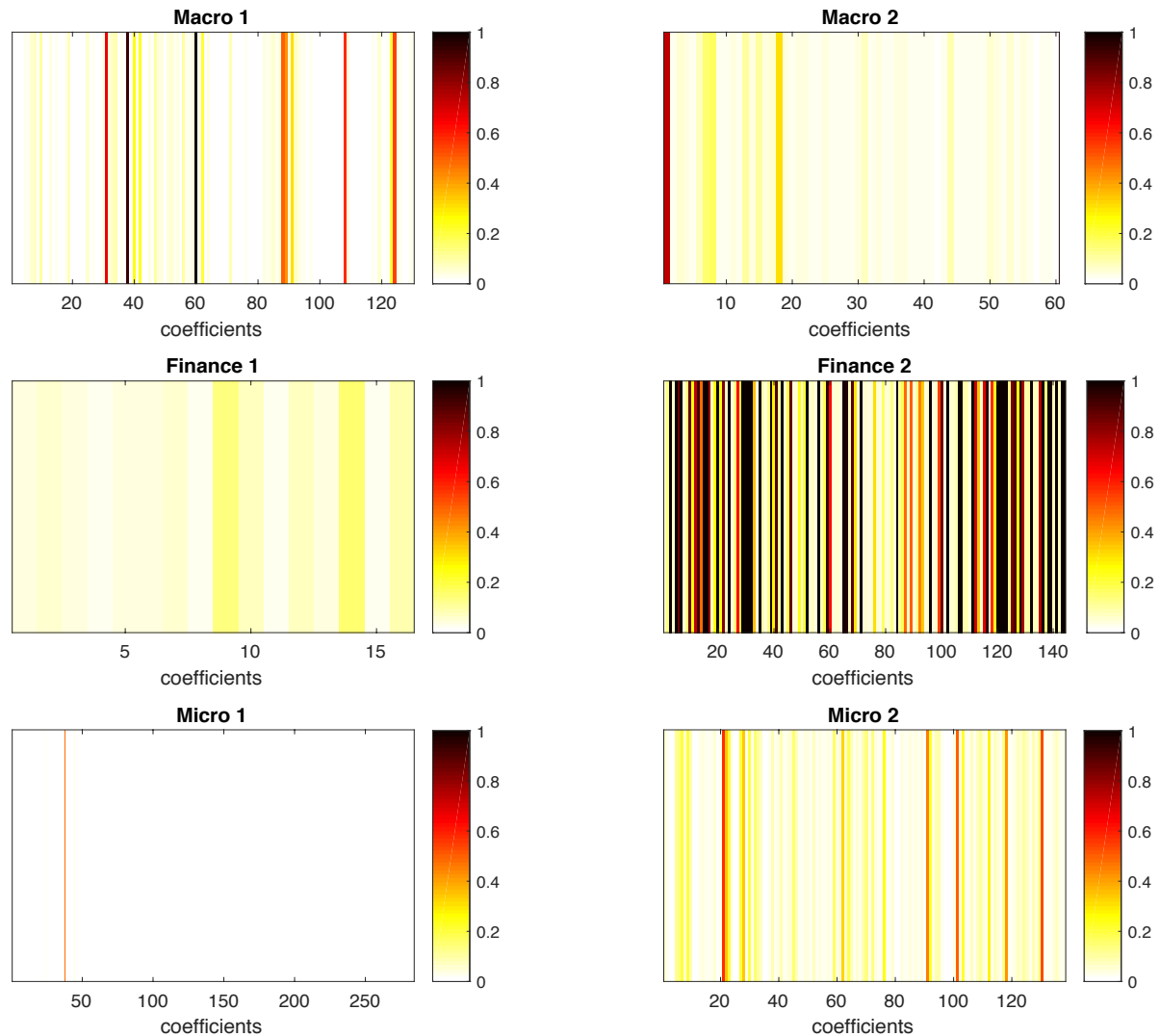
Patterns of sparsity with a flat prior on q

Probability of inclusion of each coefficient



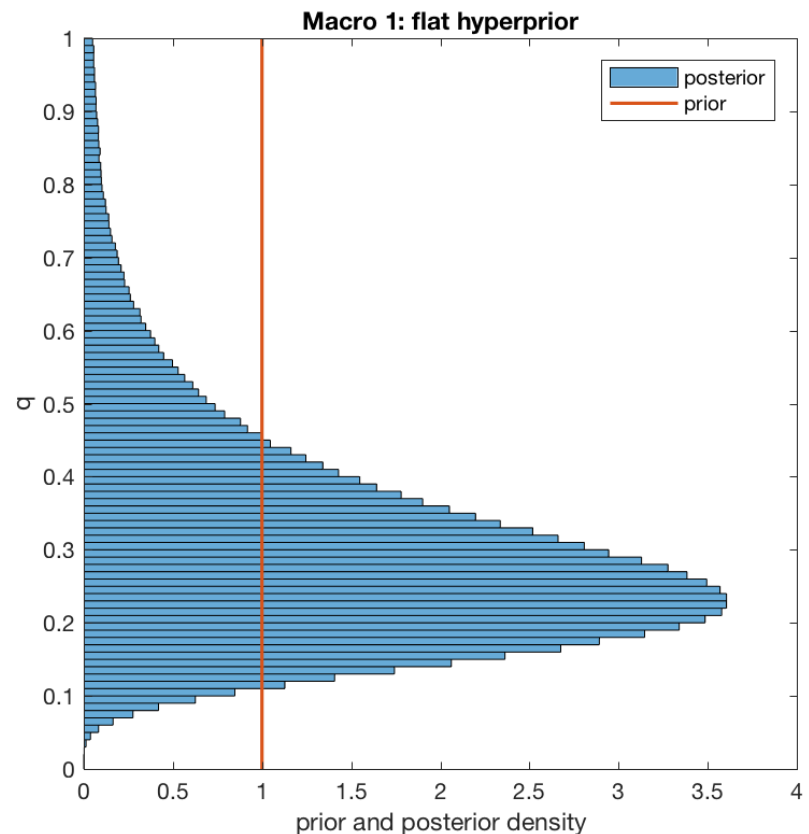
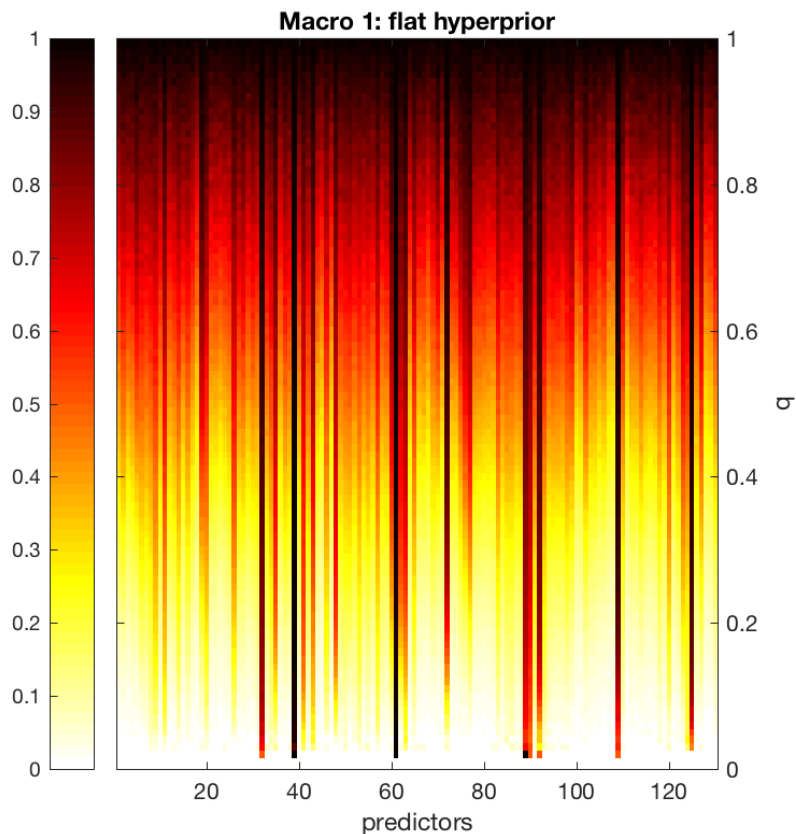
Patterns of sparsity with a tight prior on low q

Probability of inclusion of each coefficient



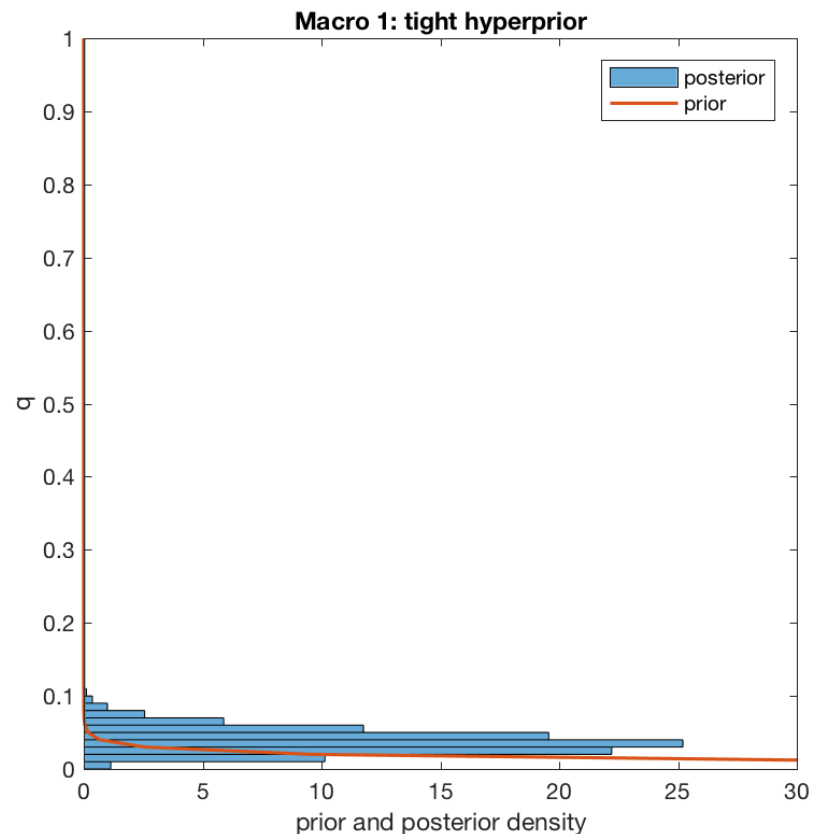
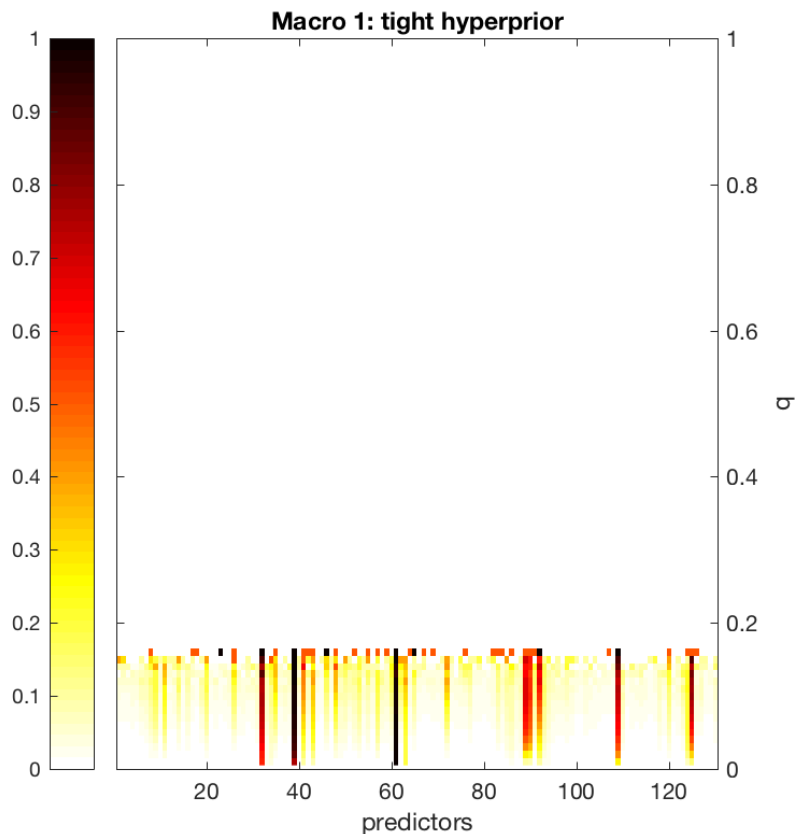
Patterns of sparsity with a flat prior on q

Probability of inclusion of each coefficient, given q

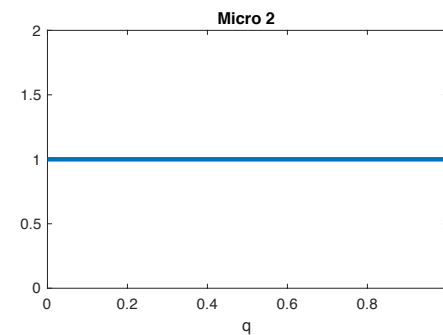
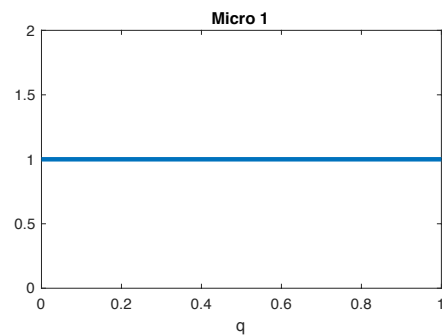
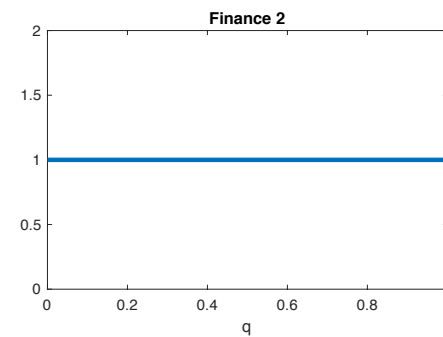
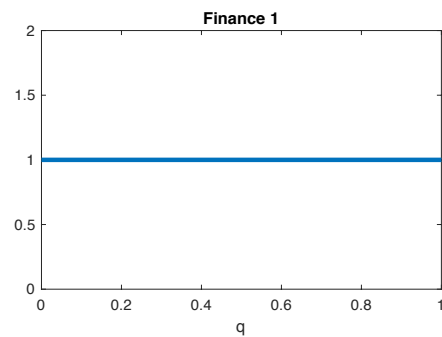
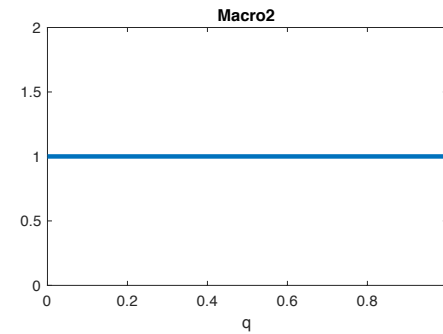
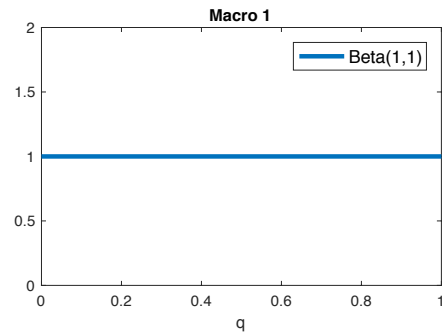


Patterns of sparsity with a tight prior on q

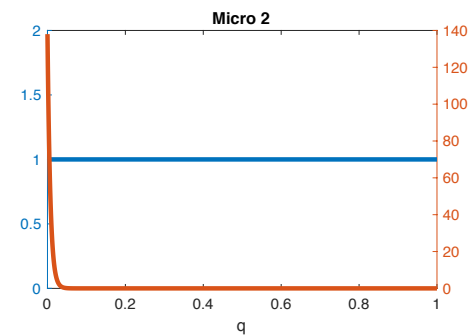
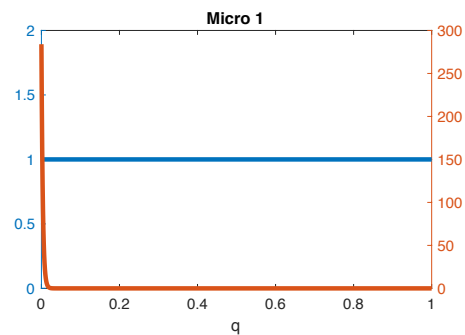
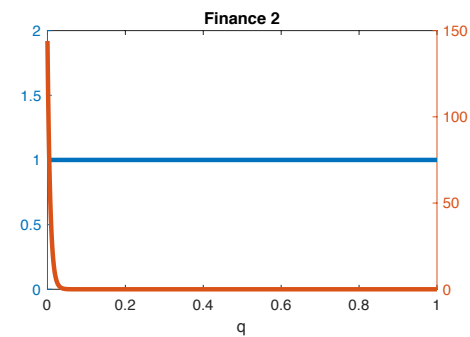
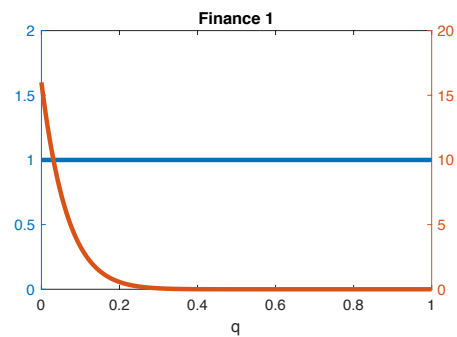
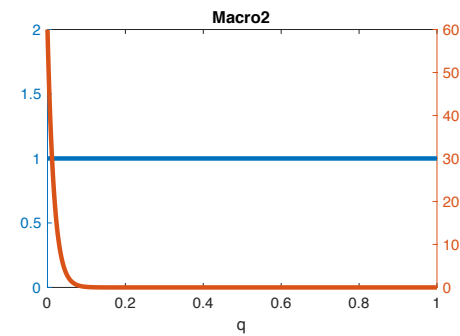
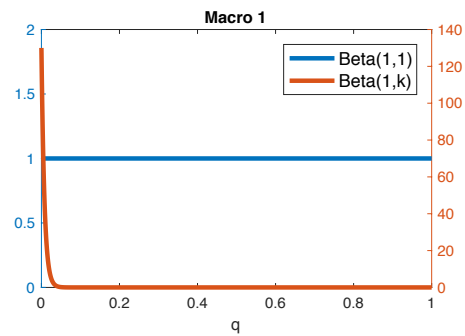
Probability of inclusion of each coefficient, given q



Baseline hyperprior: flat on q



Alternative hyperprior: tight on low q



Summing up

0. Inclusion probability and shrinkage are complements, but imperfect
1. No clear pattern of sparsity
 - Posterior not concentrated on a single sparse model, but on a wide set
2. More sparsity emerges only if very tight prior favoring small models



The illusion of sparsity

An alternative model with 2 levels of shrinkage

$$y_t = \beta_1 x_{1t} + \cdots + \beta_k x_{kt} + \varepsilon_t, \quad \varepsilon_t \underset{iid}{\sim} \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2)$$

- Main idea: coefficients might be **large**, **small** or **zero**

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➤ Baseline prior

$$\beta_i | \sigma^2, \gamma^2, q \underset{iid}{\sim} \begin{cases} \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 \gamma^2) & \text{with pr. } q \\ 0 & \text{with pr. } 1 - q \end{cases}$$

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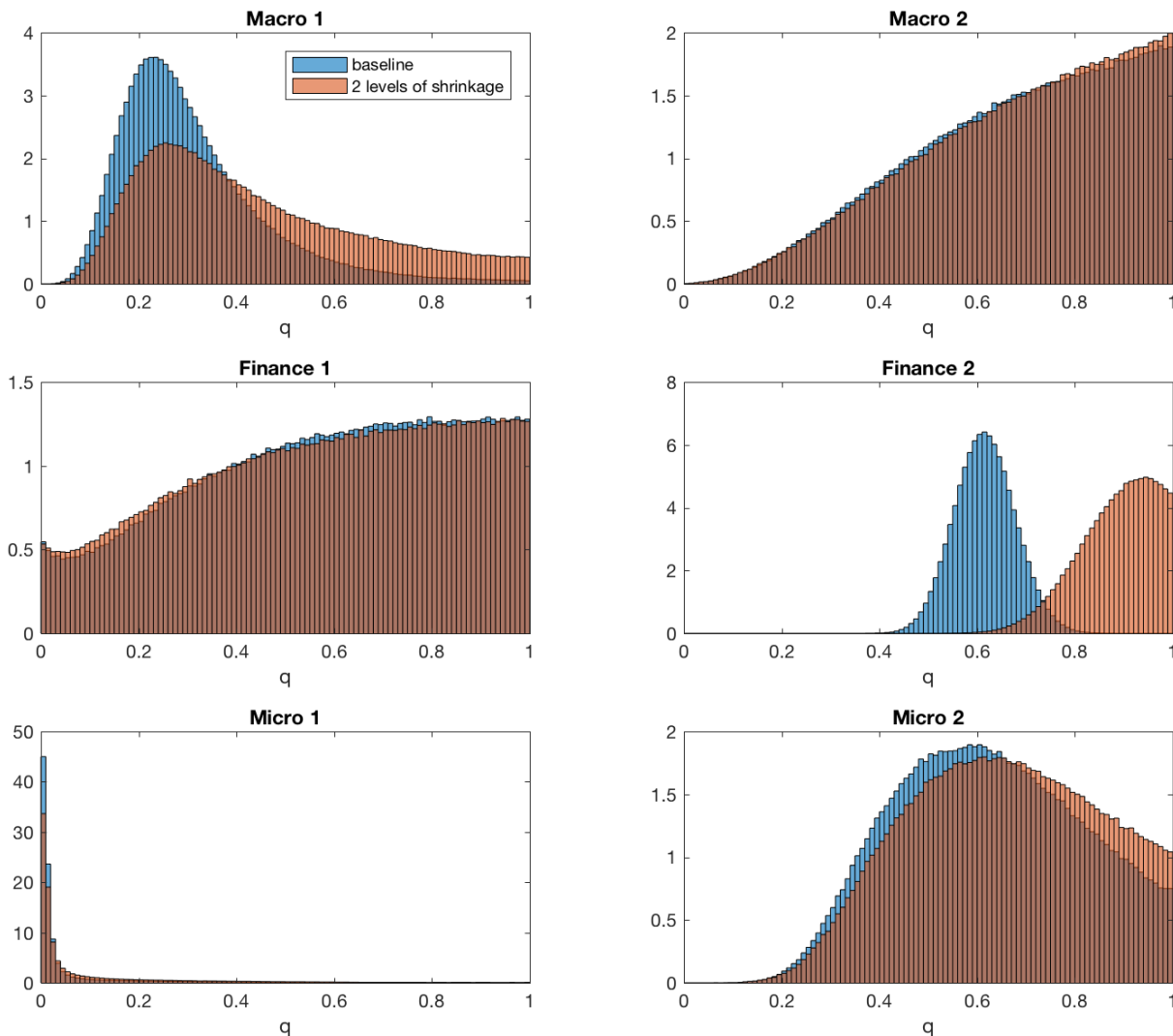
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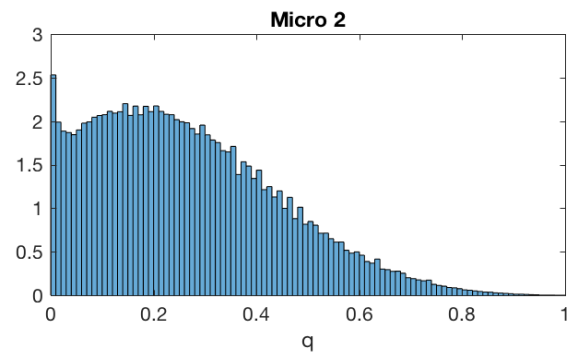
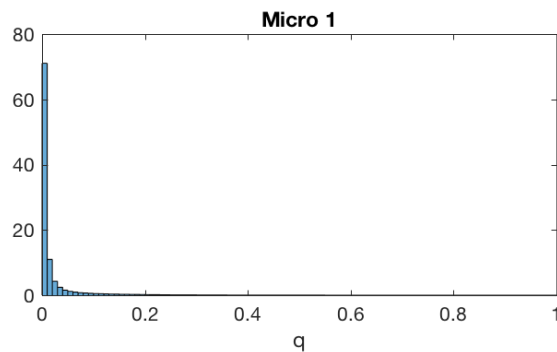
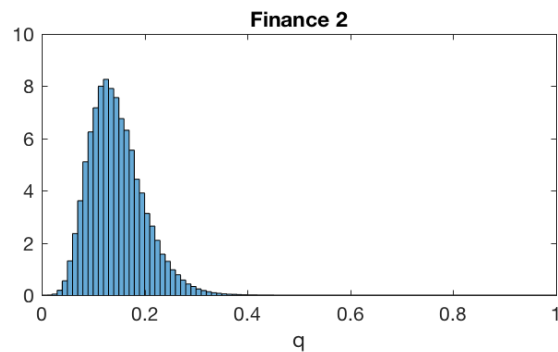
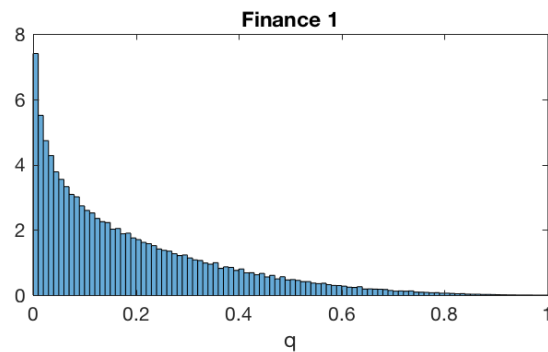
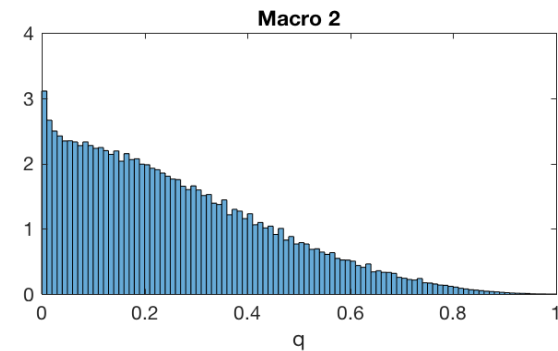
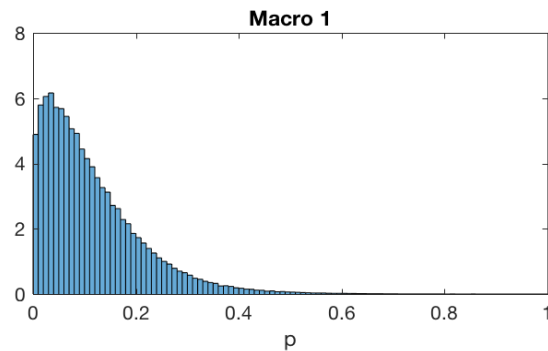
➤ Alternative prior

$$\beta_i | \sigma^2, \gamma^2, q \underset{iid}{\sim} \begin{cases} \left(\mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 \gamma_h^2) \right) & \text{with pr. } p \\ \left(\mathcal{N}(0, \sigma^2 \gamma_l^2) \right) & \text{with pr. } 1 - p \\ 0 & \text{with pr. } q \\ & \text{with pr. } 1 - q \end{cases}$$

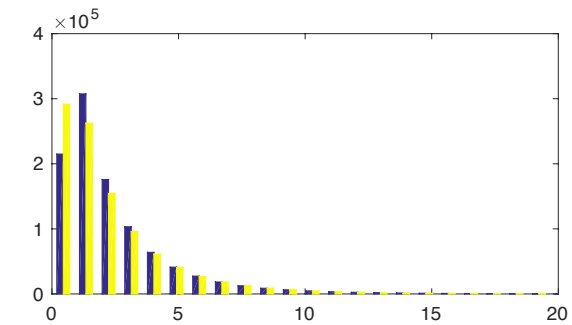
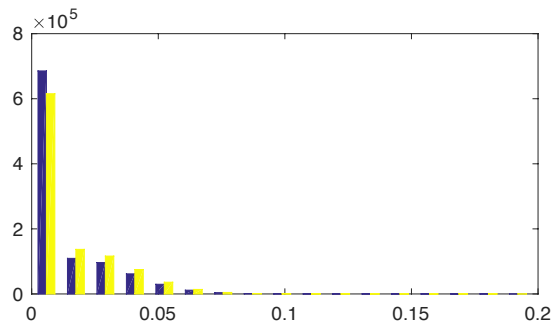
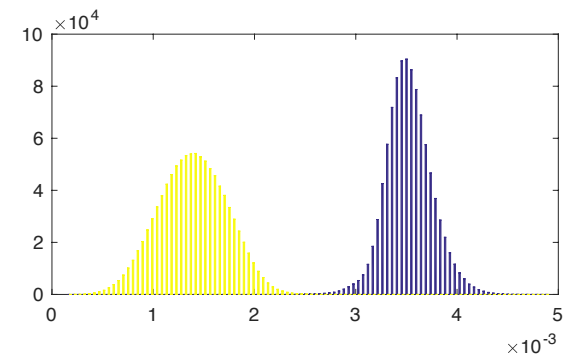
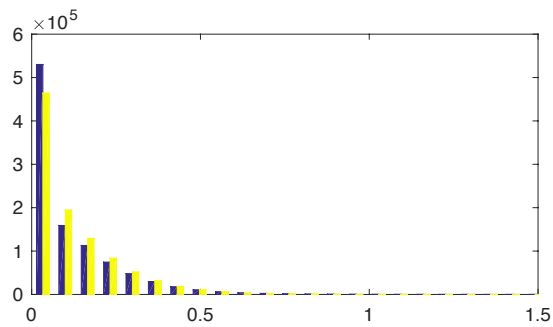
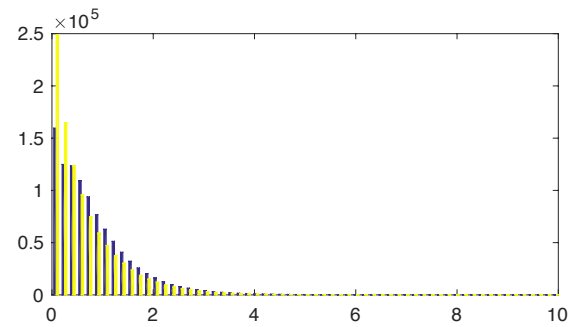
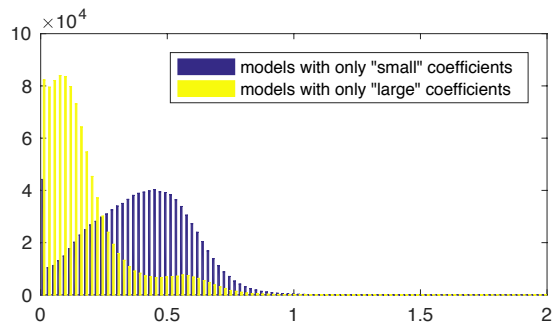
Posterior probability of inclusion, large or small



Posterior probability of inclusion, large



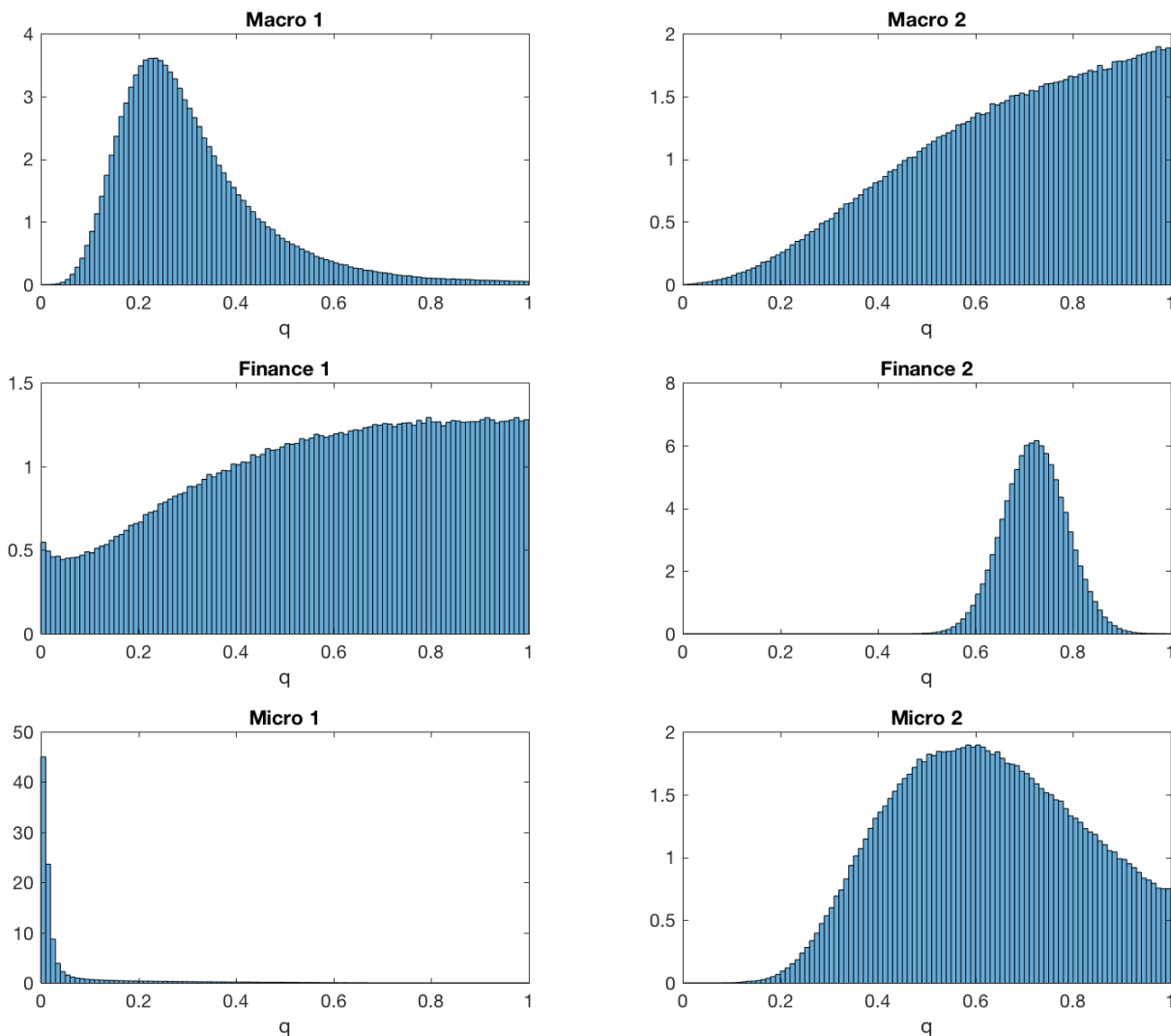
Posterior of prediction errors



“Robustness” of dense models

- Suppose want/need to pick a **single** model, not BMA
- Sometimes clear answer based on $p(q|Y)$

Posterior probability of inclusion: $p(q|Y)$



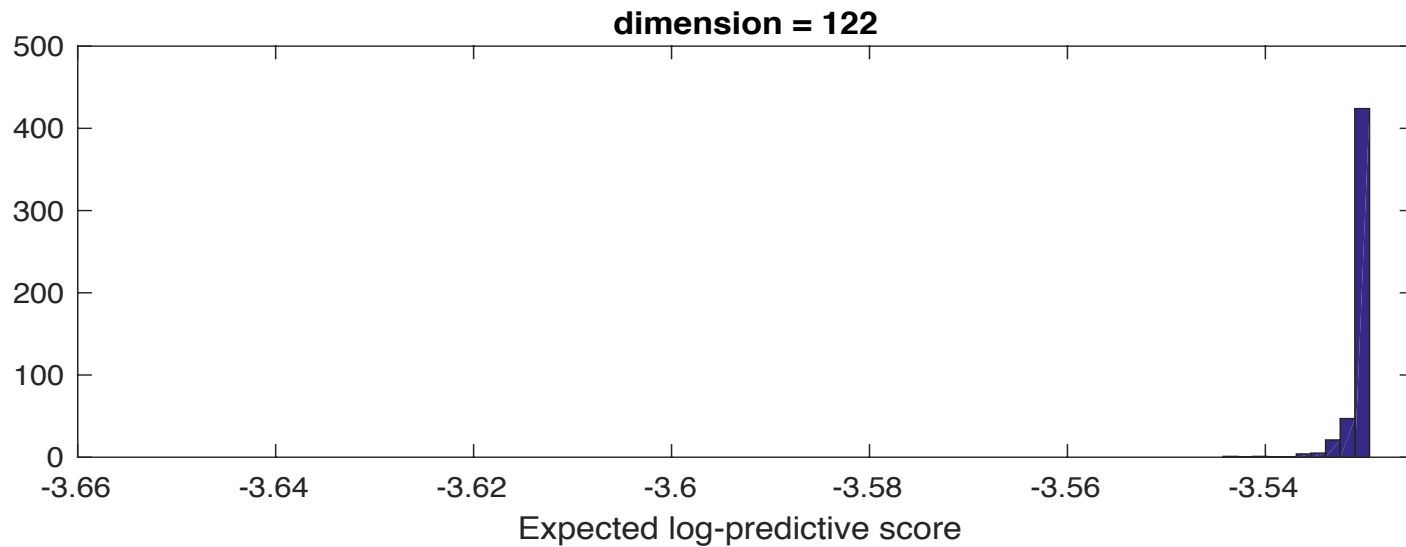
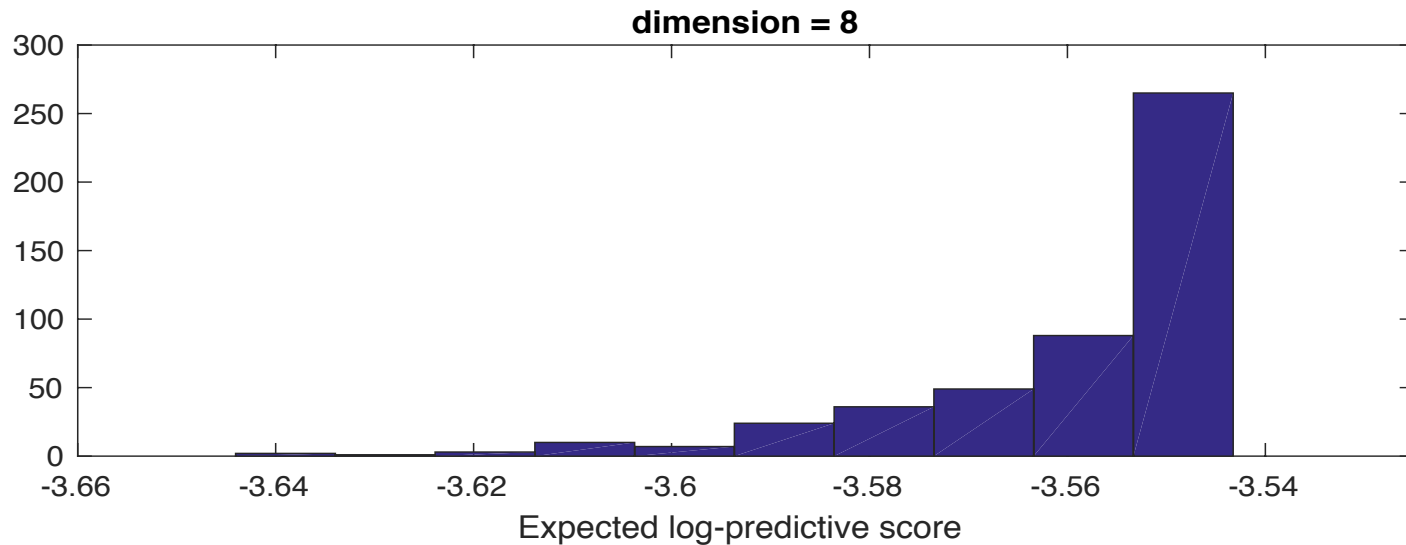
“Robustness” of dense models

- Suppose want/need to pick a **single** model, not BMA
- Sometimes clear answer based on $p(q|Y)$
- But what if $p(q|Y)$ peaks in the middle of the $[0,1]$ interval, say 0.5?
 - high-q model \approx low-q model

“Robustness” of dense models

- Suppose want/need to pick a **single** model, not BMA
- Sometimes clear answer based on $p(q|Y)$
- But what if $p(q|Y)$ peaks in the middle of the $[0,1]$ interval, say 0.5?
 - high- q model \approx low- q model
- Intuition: Elements of high- q mixture more similar to each other and to dense model
- More formally: Expected log-predictive score

Macro 1: Expected log-predictive scores



Who's that predictor? Macro 1

Id	Description	q	qp	q(1-p)	Lars
39	All Employees: Nondurable goods	99	68	31	2
61	ISM : New Orders Index	97	83	15	1
125	Avg Hourly Earnings : Construction	92	39	52	8
109	ISM Manufacturing: Prices Index	90	45	44	14
32	Initial Claims	84	33	54	3
92	3-Month Treasury Bill Minus FFR	83	42	40	5
89	Moody's Aaa Corporate Bond Yield	80	39	40	12

Who's that predictor? Finance 2

Id	Description	q	qp	LARS	FNW
31	Short Term Reversal (L/L)	100	100	1	7/8
144	Std. Unexplained Volume (H/H)	100	100	2	7/8
139	Short Term Reversal (H/H)	100	100	3	7/8
16	Market Capitalization (L/L)	100	100	4	6/8
17	Turnover (L/L)	100	100	16	6/8
25	Distance from 52-week high (L/L)	100	98	27	6/8
36	Std. Unexplained Volume (L/L)	100	98	5	7/8
121	Idiosyncratic Volatility (H/H)	100	96	26	2/8
133	Distance from 52-week high (H/H)	100	75	36	6/8
108	Std. Unexplained Volume (L)	100	75	13	7/8
4	Book to market (L/L)	100	48	9	1/8

Probability of inclusion (q) and R^2

