

# FACTORS AFFECTING THE VALUATION OF CORPORATE BONDS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

An important body of literature in Financial Economics accepts bond ratings as a sufficient metric for determining homogeneous groups of bonds for estimating either risk-neutral probabilities or spot rate curves for valuing corporate bonds. In this paper we examine Moodys and Standard & Poors ratings of corporate bonds and show they are not sufficient metrics for determining spot rate curves and pricing relationships. We investigate several bond characteristics that have been hypothesized as affecting bond prices and show that from among this set of measures default risk, liquidity, tax liability, recovery rate and bond age leads to better estimates of spot curves and for pricing bonds. This has implications for what factors affect corporate bond prices as well as valuing individual bonds.

The valuation of corporate debt is an important issue in asset pricing. While there has been an enormous amount of theoretical modeling of corporate bond prices, there has been relatively little empirical testing of these models<sup>1</sup>. Recently there has been extensive development of rating based reduced form models. These models take as a premise that bonds when grouped by ratings are homogeneous with respect to risk. For each risk group the models require estimates of several characteristics such as the spot yield curve, the default probabilities and the recovery rate. These estimates are then used to compute the theoretical price for each bond in the group. The purpose of this article is to examine the pricing of corporate bonds when bonds are grouped by ratings, and to investigate the ability of characteristics, in addition to bond ratings, to improve the performance of models which determine theoretical prices. While a number of authors have used bond ratings as the sole determinant of quality, implicit or explicit in much of this work is the idea that a finer classification would be desirable. This is the first paper to explicitly test the impact of additional variables on bond prices across a large sample of corporate bonds. Most of our testing will be conducted in models which are in the spirit of the theory developed by Duffee and Singleton (1997) and Duffee (1999).

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we discuss various reduced form models that have been suggested in the literature. In the second section we examine how well standard classifications serve as a metric for forming homogeneous groups. In this section

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<sup>1</sup> Most testing of theoretical models has been performed using other types of debt. Cumby and Evans (1997) examine Brady bonds, Merrick (1999) examines Russian bonds and Madan and Unal (1996) examine Certificates of Deposit.

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we show that using standard classifications results in errors being systematically related to specific bond characteristics. Finally, in the last section we take account of these specific bond characteristics in our estimation procedure for determining spot prices and show how this lead to improved estimates of corporate bond prices.

## I. ALTERNATIVE MODELS

There are two basic approaches to the pricing of risky debt: reduced form models and models based on option pricing. Reduced form models are found in Elton, Gruber, Agrawal, and Mann (2001), Duffie and Singleton (1997), Duffee (1999 ), Jarrow, Lando and Turnbull (1997), Lando (1997), Das and Tufano (1996). Option-based models are found in Merton (1974) and Jones, Mason, and Rosenfeld (1984). In this paper we will deal with a subset of reduced form models, those that are ratings based. Discussion of the efficacy of the second approach can be found in Jones, Mason, and Rosenfeld (1984).

The basic structure of reduced form models assumes that the value of a bond is the certainty equivalent cash flows (at risk neutral probabilities) brought back at risk free rates. For a two-period bond that has a face value of \$1, value can be expressed as follows:

$$Value_o = \frac{C(1 - \lambda_1) + a\lambda_1}{(1 + r_1)} + \frac{(1/c + 1)(1 - \lambda_1)(1 - \lambda_2) + a\lambda_2(1 - \lambda_1)}{(1 + r_2)^2} \quad (1)$$

Where:

- (1)  $C$  is the coupon
- (2)  $a$  is the recovery rate
- (3)  $r_t$  is the riskless rate from 0 to  $t$
- (4)  $\lambda_j$  are the term structure of risk neutral probabilities of default at time  $o$  which capture the probability of default, the risk premium, and taxes for all periods  $j = 1, \dots, J$ .

The issue is how to estimate the risk neutral probabilities. Risk neutral probabilities are either estimated for an individual firm using the bonds the firm has outstanding or for a group of firms that are believed to be homogeneous. This latter method uses all bonds in the homogeneous risk class. When individual firms are employed to estimate  $\lambda_j$ 's one is constrained in the type of estimation that can be done because of the limited number of observations (bonds of the same firm) which exist. Because of this, authors who estimate risk-neutral probabilities for individual firms either assume that risk neutral probabilities at a point in time do not change for different horizons ( $\lambda_j = \lambda$ ) or that the shape of the term structure of risk-neutral probabilities at any moment follows a particular simple form (can be estimated with a very small number of parameters).

Examples of research that assume that all elements in the term structure of risk neutral probabilities are the same at any moment in time ( $\lambda_j = \lambda$ ) include Yawitz (1977), Bierman and Hass (1975), and Cumby and Evans (1997). Examples of papers using a simple model to describe the term structure of risk neutral probabilities are Merrick (1999), who assumes that any moment in time risk neutral probabilities are a linear function of the time until a payment, Claessens and Pennachhi (1996), Madan and Unal (1996) or Cumby and Evans (1997), who assume risk neutral probabilities follow a standard stochastic process or Cumby and Evans (1997), who, in addition to their other model, assume a random walk with mean reversion. Another variation in modeling applied to individual firms assumes that the spread between corporates and treasuries follows a particular stochastic process both at each point in time and over time (see Duffee (1999)). This intertemporal model provides an ability to price option features on bonds which is not possible with the prior models.

The alternative to assuming that each firm has a unique set of risk neutral probabilities is to assume that some group of firms is homogeneous and therefore has the same set of risk neutral probabilities. This allows the estimation of much less constrained term structures of risk neutral probabilities. This approach has been modeled in Duffie and Singleton (1997) and Jarrow, Lando, Turnbull (1997). Both of these studies show how the term structure of risk neutral probabilities can be obtained by using the difference in corporate and government spot rates.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The difference in their estimates comes about because of a difference in assumption about recovery rates.

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Models that estimate the term structure of risk neutral probabilities from the bonds of a single firm will have errors because small sample sizes mean that the model used to estimate the term structure of risk neutral probabilities is likely to be estimated with substantial error and because the model is likely to be oversimplified. The major source of errors for models that use a homogeneous group of bonds comes from the possibility that investors view the bonds within a group as having different risk.

In this paper we will explore how to determine a homogeneous group to minimize risk differences. Like Jarrow, Lando and Turnbull (1997), we will initially assume that Moody's or S&P rating classes are a sufficient metric for defining a homogeneous group. We will then show that pricing errors within a group vary with bond characteristics. How these variations can be dealt with and the improvement that comes from accounting for these differences will then be explored.. We will do so using the Duffie Singleton (1997) model to price corporate bonds. One of the nice features of the model is that with this model using risk neutral probabilities and riskless rates is equivalent to discounting promised cash flows at corporate spot rates. In this article we will use this equivalent form.

## **II ANALYSIS BASED ON RATING CLASS**

In this section we initially accept Moody's rating as a sufficient metric for homogeneity and investigate the pricing of bonds under this assumption. We start by describing our sample

and the method used to extract spot rates for corporate bonds. We then examine the pricing errors for bonds when this technique is applied.

## **A. Data**

Our bond data is extracted from the Lehman Brothers Fixed Income database distributed by Warga (1998). This database contains monthly price, accrued interest, and return data on all investment grade corporate bonds and government bonds. In addition, the database contains descriptive data on bonds including coupon, ratings, and callability.

A subset of the data in the Warga database is used in this study. First, any bond that is matrix-priced rather than trader-priced in a particular month is eliminated from the sample for that month. Employing matrix prices might mean that all our analysis uncovers is the formula used to matrix-price bonds rather than the economic influences at work in the market. Eliminating matrix-priced bonds leaves us with a set of prices based on dealer quotes. This is the same type of data contained in the standard academic source of government bond data: the CRSP government bond file.

Next, we eliminate all bonds with special features that would result in their being priced differently. This means we eliminate all bonds with options (e.g., callable or sinking fund), all corporate floating rate debt, bonds with an odd frequency of coupon payments, government flower

bonds and index-linked bonds.<sup>3</sup> Next, we eliminate all bonds not included in the Lehman Brothers bond indexes because researchers in charge of the database at Shearson-Lehman indicated that the care in preparing the data was much less for bonds not included in their indexes. Finally we eliminate bonds where the data is problematic.<sup>4</sup> For classifying bonds we use Moody's ratings. In the few cases where Moody's ratings do not exist, we classify using the parallel S&P rating.

Our final sample covered the ten year period: 1987-1996. Details on sample size are presented in the accompanying tables. The basic sample varied from an average of 42 bonds for the industrial Aa category to 278 bonds for the financial A category.

## **B. Extracting Spot Rates**

In this section we discuss the methods of extracting spots from bond prices and apply it to our sample when Moody's ratings are used to define a homogeneous risk class.

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<sup>3</sup> The alternative was to construct a model which explicitly prices the option like features. While this is an interesting project, it is helpful to understand the determination of risk and homogeneity before dealing with option pricing.

<sup>4</sup> Slightly less than 3% of the sample was eliminated because of problematic data. The eliminated bonds had either a price that was clearly out of line with surrounding prices (pricing error) or involved a company or bond undergoing a major change.

Calculating model prices following Duffie and Singleton involves the discounting of promised cash flows at spot rates. Implementing this procedure is straightforward. First, spot rates must be estimated. In order to find spot rates, we used the Nelson Siegel (1987) procedure for estimating spots from a set of coupon paying bonds. For each rating category, including governments, spots can be estimated at a point in time (zero) as follows:<sup>5</sup>

$$P_{i0} = \sum_{t=1}^T D_t CF_{it}$$

$$D_t = e^{-r_{0t}t}$$

$$r_{0t} = a_0 + (a_1 + a_2) \left[ \frac{1 - e^{-a_3 t}}{a_3 t} \right] - a_2 e^{-a_3 t} \quad (2)$$

Where

$P_{i0}$  is the price of bond  $i$  at time 0

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<sup>5</sup> See Nelson and Siegel (1987). For comparisons with other procedures, see Green and Odegaard (1997) and Dahlquist and Svensson (1996). We also investigated the McCulloch cubic spline procedures and found substantially similar results throughout our analysis. The Nelson and Siegel model was fit using standard Gauss-Newton non-linear least squared methods. The Nelson and Siegel (1987) and McCulloch (1971) procedures have the advantage of using all bonds outstanding within any rating class in the estimation procedure, therefore lessening the effect of sparse data over some maturities and lessening the effect of pricing errors on one or more bonds. The cost of these procedures is that they place constraints on the shape of the yield curve.

$CF_{it}$  is the promised cash flow on bond  $i$  that is expected to occur  $t$  periods later

$D_t$  is the present value as of time zero for a payment that is received  $t$  periods in the future

$r_{0t}$  is the spot rate at time zero for a payment to be received at time  $t$

$a_0, a_1, a_2$  and  $a_3$  are parameters of the model.

For each rating class for each month, these equations are fitted to the cash flows for all bonds in that rating class to minimize mean squared pricing error. Discounting the promised cash flows on each bond in a particular rating class at the estimated spot rates for that rating class produces the model price for that bond. Table 1 presents the pricing errors when this technique is used. For all rating classes the average pricing error is close to zero. The average error is less than 1 cent per \$100 of the face value of the bond over the sample period. This is not surprising because the Nelson Siegel procedure should give unbiased estimates of the appropriate spot rates for each rating class. While the Nelson Siegel procedure has to produce errors which on average are due to zero, it might produce errors which are related to maturity and thus introduce bias. The Nelson Siegel procedure, like all curve-fitting techniques, pre-specifies a functional form for the discount rates. If the estimated function does not fit the shape of the spot curve well, then pricing errors would be a function of maturity. For example, if the function misestimates long rates, model prices for long bonds will be above actual prices. To analyze this we computed average differences between model prices and dealer prices (errors) at each interval of maturity used in

Table II. The average pricing error across maturities varied from .1 cent per \$100 to 2.6 cents per \$100. This is very similar to the overall average pricing error across all maturities. Of one cent per \$100. Furthermore, the errors showed no pattern across maturities. No part of the maturity spectrum was systematically over- or underpriced. This is consistent with what others have found when using the Nelson and Siegel procedure (see Green and Odergaard (1997) or Dahlquist and Svenson (1996)). Thus the prespecified functional form in Nelson and Siegel seems to be general enough not to introduce systematic pricing errors.

We can learn more about risk classes by examining the absolute pricing errors produced by the Nelson Siegel procedure. This is a measure of the dispersion of errors across bonds within one rating class and thus, of how homogeneous the rating class is. To the extent that rating classes are not homogeneous or there is a lot of noise in the dealer prices on which we measure errors, the dispersion of pricing errors (the average absolute pricing error) would be quite large. The results in Table 1 show that while Moody's rating classes do an excellent job of pricing the "average bond" there are large errors in pricing individual bonds. The errors vary from 34 cents per \$100 for Financials Aa's to over \$1.17 for Baa industrials. This suggests that there are other variables that systematically effect bond prices and by studying pricing errors we can uncover the additional influences. In the next section we will explore this issue.

## **II OTHER FACTORS THAT AFFECT RISK**

When estimating spot rates, one has to make a decision as to how to construct a group of bonds that is homogeneous with respect to risk. In the prior section we followed other researchers

by accepting the major classifications of rating agencies. In this section we explore the use of additional data to form more meaningful groups. This improves the pricing of individual bonds. This should also provide insight into the importance of other factors in pricing corporate bonds.

In general, when dividing bonds into subsets, one faces a difficult tradeoff. The more subsets one has, the less bonds are present in any subset. Bond prices are subject to idiosyncratic noise as well as systematic influences. The more bonds in a subset, the more the idiosyncratic noise is averaged out. This suggests larger groupings. However, if the subset is not homogeneous, one may be averaging out important differences in underlying risk and mis-estimating spot rates because they are estimated for a group of bonds where subsets of the group have different yield curves.

What are the characteristics of bonds that vary within a rating class that could lead to price differences? We will examine the following possibilities:

- (A) Default Risk
- (B) Liquidity
- (C) Tax Liability
- (D) Recovery Rates
- (E) Age

**A. Differential Default Risks**

All bonds within a rating class may not be viewed as equally risky. There are several characteristics of bonds which might be useful in dividing bonds within a rating class into new

groups. We will examine several of these in this section. We start by examining the subcategories within a rating class which Moody's and Standard & Poors have both introduced. We then examine whether either past changes in rating or a difference in rating between Moody's and Standard & Poors convey information.

We start by examining the finer breakdown of ratings produced by the rating agencies themselves. Standard & Poors and Moody's have introduced plus and minus categories within each letter rating class. One obvious possibility is that bonds that are rated as a plus or a minus are viewed as having different risk than bonds that receive a flat letter rating. If this is true, then estimating one set of spot rates for all bonds in a class should result in consistent pricing errors for bonds rated "plus" (too low a model price and hence negative errors) or bonds rating "minus" (too high a model price and hence positive errors).

Tables II A and II B explore this possibility. For each rating class the table is split into two sections. The top section shows the number of bond months in each rating class for varying maturity and across all maturities.<sup>6</sup> The bottom section shows the average of the model price minus the invoice price (market price plus accrued interest) for each rating category. For all rating categories, plus-rated bonds have, on average, too low a model price, and minus-rated bonds too high a model price. The difference between the pricing error of plus rated, flat and negative rated bonds is highly statistically significant as shown in Table II. Furthermore, the differences are of economic significance (e.g., for minus versus flat Baa industrial bonds the overall difference is

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<sup>6</sup> For all bonds rated by Moody's we use Moody's classification. For the few bonds not rated by Moody's, we use S&P's classification.

over 1% of the invoice price). The same pattern is present for most of the maturities with some tendency for the magnitude of errors to increase with the maturity. In addition, the size of the average pricing error increases as rating decreases. Thus, it is most important for Baa bonds. This would suggest that one should estimate a separate spot curve for these subclasses of ratings. However, for much of the sample, the paucity of bonds in many of the subclasses makes it difficult to estimate meaningful spot rates for a subclass. In a latter section we will explore how these differences can be built into an estimation procedure for spot rates.

There is a second reason why investors might consider bonds within the same rating class to have different risk. Investors might believe that a particular bond is likely to be downgraded or upgraded. One predictor of this might be past rating changes. Past rating changes might predict future rating changes, either because rating agencies tended to make changes in steps or because a company whose risk has increased or decreased in the past is more likely to experience similar changes in the future. In Table III we explore whether past rating changes contain information about future rating changes. As shown in the table, bonds that have been upgraded in the past are more than twice as likely to be upgraded in the future than they are to be downgraded, and bonds that have been downgraded in the past are about twice as likely to be downgraded than upgraded in the future. These effects are statistically significant at the 1% level as shown in Table 3.

Although there is some evidence that past rating changes predict future rating changes, it is unclear if the tendency is strong enough to show up in price data. We examined differences between model price and invoice price for all bonds which had a past change in ratings. Pricing errors were examined in the month of the change, the next three months after the change, and the

period 4 to 15 months after the change. These results are shown in Table IV. Despite the fact that past rating changes contain information about future rating changes, we find no evidence that bonds with past rating changes have prices that are systematically different from model prices. Our sample of bonds with rating changes was quite small, for there were few bonds which had rating changes. Thus the failure to find a relationship between past rating changes and errors could arise either because investors do not take the predictability of past rating changes into account when they price bonds, or simply because the number of rating changes is so small that the effect is swamped by random pricing errors. In any case, examining past rating changes provides no evidence that the Markov assumption used in calculating the transition probability matrix found in many studies is violated.

In Table V we explore whether bonds that are given a higher (lower) rating by S&P than by Moody's are considered less (more) risky by investors. Recall that our yield curves are derived using Moody's ratings. The question is whether when Standard & Poor's gives the bond a higher rating than Moody's does this indicate that the bond is less risky: does an investor believe that the second rating conveys information not contained in the first rating. In considering differences we use pluses and minuses. Thus, if Moody's rates a bond as Baa and S&P rates the bond BBB+, we count this as a difference in ratings. Once again the upper half of the table shows the number of bonds in each category, and the lower half the difference between model price and invoice price. In presenting the data we do not sub-classify by maturity since we found no pattern in pricing errors across maturity.

Investors clearly take the difference in rating into account. If the S&P rating is lower than Moody's, then investors act as if the bond is higher risk than is implied by the Moody's rating and they will set a lower market price, and this results in a model price above invoice price and a positive error. Likewise, if S&P rates the bond higher than Moody's the bond is considered by investors as lower risk compared to bonds where they agree and the pricing error is negative. Almost all of the results are statistically significant at the 1% level. The errors when the rating agencies disagree is statistically different from the errors when they agree. Neither Moody's nor S&P ratings have the dominant influence. When we reversed the table and examined the effect when Moody's ratings differed from S&P (rather than S&P from Moody's), we got similar results.

## **B. Different Liquidity**

The second reason why bonds within a rating class might be valued differently is because they have different liquidity. Data is not available on bid/ask spread, the most direct measure of liquidity, nor is there data on trading volume which is a natural proxy for liquidity. We used three indirect measures of liquidity: dollar value outstanding, the percentage of months a bond was matrix priced, and whether a bond was recently issued. Our logic behind the second measure was that dealers priced the more active issues more often. Thus bonds that were always dealer-priced were likely to be more liquid than bonds that were dealer-priced only part of the time. Neither of the first two measures showed any significant patterns, and so we have not presented a table of results. The third measure rests on the belief that newly issued bonds are more liquid than bonds

which have been in the market for a longer period of time. We defined newly issued bonds as bonds that were brought to the market within the previous year. Table VI shows the difference between newly issued (first-year bonds) and older bonds. Once again the top half is the number of bond months in each cell, and the bottom half is the average difference between model price and invoice price. As shown in Table VI, newly issued bonds sell at a premium compared to model prices and all of these results are highly statistically significant. These results are consistent with newly issued bonds being more liquid.<sup>7</sup>

### **C. Different Tax Treatment**

The third possible reason why bonds within a risk class might be viewed by investors differently is because they have different after tax value because of the way coupons and capital gains are taxed. Throughout most of the period used in our study the tax rates on capital gains and interest income were the same. However, since capital gains are paid at the time of sale, bonds with lower coupons may be more valuable because some taxes are postponed until the time of sale and because the holder of the bond has control over when these taxes are paid (tax timing option). In order to examine the effect of taxes, we group bonds by coupon and examined the model errors. Table VII shows the results for Baa rated industrial bonds. The results for other ratings are similar. The entries in Panel B represent model prices minus invoice price across six

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<sup>7</sup> We repeated the analysis matching bond maturity of the newly issued and seasoned bonds. There was no change in results.

coupon categories and different maturities. Panel A shows the number of bond months in each category.

If taxes matter, we would expect to see a particular pattern in this table. Spot rates capture average tax rates. High coupon bonds are tax disadvantaged. If taxes matter, their model price will be too high and we will observe a positive pricing error. This is what we see in Table VII. In addition, as shown in Table VII, the longer the maturity of the bond, the more significant the pricing error becomes. For bonds with coupons below the average coupon in a risk class we should get the opposite sign (a negative sign) on the pricing error and the size of the error should become more negative with the maturity of the bond. This is the pattern shown in Table VII. Using a two-way analysis of variance test we can reject at the 1% level the hypothesis that the average errors are unaffected by coupon and maturity. If we compared the overall pricing error for high coupon (11%, 15%) to low coupon bonds (5%, 6.5%), the difference is significant at the 1% level.

#### **D. Different Recovery Rates**

The fourth reason investors might rate bonds differently within a risk class is because of different expectations about recovery. Firms go bankrupt, not individual bonds. Bonds of the same firm with different ratings imply that the rating agency believes they will have different recovery rates. Thus investors should believe that an A bond of an Aa firm has different expected recovery rate than an Aa bond of the same firm.

Moody's (or S&P) ratings for any bond are a combination of their estimate of default risk for the company issuing the bond and their estimate of the recovery rate on the bond if the firm goes bankrupt. If their implicit weighting is the same as investors, then sorting a bond rating class by different company ratings should not result in pricing errors being related to the company rating. Examining Table VIII shows that bonds where the bond rating is higher than the company rating have model prices above invoice prices. When the model price is above the invoice price, investors are requiring a higher rate of return in pricing the bond. Bonds whose ratings are above companies ratings (e.g., Aa and A respectively), have more default risk and higher recovery rates than bonds which have company and bond rating both equal to that of the bond (e.g. both AA). Since, from Table VIII, investors price these bonds lower, investors are placing more weight on bankruptcy probability and less on estimated recovery rates than Moody's does. The same logic holds for bonds ranked below the company rating. The differences are highly significant except for AA financials.

This raises another question. Could pricing be improved by discounting bonds at spot rates estimated from groups formed by using company rating rather than formed by bond rating? When we use company ratings to form groups and estimate spots the pricing errors are much larger. Bonds should be priced from discount rates estimated from groups using bond rating. However, taking into account the difference between bond rating and company rating adds information.

#### **E. Bond Age**

We explore one other reason why bonds in a particular rating class might be viewed differently by investors: age of the bond. While the finance literature presents no economic reason why this might be true except for liquidity effects with new issues, it is a common way to present data in the corporate bond area, and it is an important consideration if one wants to model rating drift as a Markov process.<sup>8</sup> The issue is whether a bond with 15 years to maturity rated A, and ten years old, is different from a bond with the same characteristics but two years old. When we examined this issue, except for new issues, there was no age effect. Thus there is no definitive evidence that the Markov assumption is being violated, and no definitive evidence that age of the bond is an important characteristic for classification. We believe that the new bond effect (age under one year) shows up because it represents a liquidity effect. New bonds tend to be more liquid during their first year of existence.

#### **IV Adjusting for Differences**

We have now shown that a number of factors combined one at a time cause bonds within the same Moody's classification to have systematic price differences. The next step is to examine what proportion of the variation in errors across bonds can be explained by these factors and whether they are important when considered jointly. In addition, we do more formal statistical testing in this section.

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For example, Moody's typically presents data on the default rates as a function of the age of the bonds.

Our prior analysis has shown the following influences are important:

1. A plus or minus rating within each risk letter classification. Furthermore, the importance is a function of maturity.
2. Differences in S&P and Moody's rating.
3. The coupon on a bond.
4. Differences in bond and company ratings.
5. Issued within the past one year.

To estimate the adjustment function we regressed model errors on a series of variables to capture simultaneously the impact of the influences discussed above. The variables are discrete except for coupon which is continuous. The regression we estimated is

$$E_j = \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^8 B_i V_{ij} + e_j \quad (3)$$

Where

$E_j$  = the error measured as model price minus invoice price for bond j

$V_{1j}$  = the maturity of a bond if it is rated plus otherwise zero

$V_{2j}$  = the maturity of a bond if it is rated minus, otherwise zero

$V_{3j}$  = dummy variable which is 1 if S&P rates a bond higher than Moody's, otherwise zero

$V_{4j}$  = dummy variable which is 1 if Moody's rates a bond higher than S&P, otherwise zero

$V_{5j}$  = the coupon on the bond minus the average coupon across all bonds<sup>9</sup>

$V_{6j}$  = dummy variable which is 1 if the company has a higher rating than the bond, otherwise zero

$V_{7j}$  = a dummy variable which is 1 if the bond has a higher rating than the company, otherwise zero

$V_{8j}$  = a dummy variable which is 1 if the bond is less than 1 year of age, otherwise zero

$B_i$  = the sensitivity of errors to variable  $i$ .

The regression is estimated for bonds within each rating class for industrials and financials separately. Results are shown in Table IX. Almost all regression coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level in every sample and have the sign that we would expect to see. The adjusted  $R^2$  vary between .05 and .3 and average .18.

If we examine the regression coefficients one at a time we see very strong results. For plus rating the regression has the right sign for all rating categories and five of the six coefficients are significant at the 1% level. For minus ratings the coefficient has the right sign and is significant for five of the six categories. In the one group where the sign is inconsistent with what we would expect the coefficient is both small and not statistically significantly different from zero at the 5%

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<sup>9</sup> This variable was demeaned as not to transfer the average tax effect to the intercept.

level. When interpreting the signs, recall that plus rated bonds are expected to have a negative error since the model price overestimates their risk.

Turning to bonds which have a S&P rating different from their Moody's rating, we find that the S&P rating contains added information about prices. For differences in ratings in either direction, the coefficient has the appropriate sign in all cases and is significantly different from zero at the 1% level in all but one case.

We have hypothesized that high coupon bonds were less desirable due to taxes. The coupon variable has the correct sign in all cases and a coefficient which is significantly different from zero (at the 1% level) in five of the six case. While we reasoned that the impact of company and bond ratings were ambiguous because it depends on the weight the investor places on recovery rate versus probability of bankruptcy, the results tell a very consistent story. Of the 11 groups examined, 10 had consistent signs and of these 10, 7 had coefficients which were statistically significantly different from zero at the 1% level. The one coefficient with the inconsistent sign was not significantly different from zero at the 5% level. These results indicate that investors place more emphasis on bankruptcy risk than the relative weight it is given in bond ratings. Finally, new bonds sell at a premium. All the estimates have the right sign and are statistically different from zero at the 1% level.

The next logical step would be to take the influences discussed above into account in defining new classifications (homogeneous groups) of bonds that exist within each Moody's risk classification and to estimate new spot curves within each classification. Unfortunately, this

would result in such fine classifications that we would have too few bonds within each classification to estimate spot curves with any accuracy.

An alternative is to introduce these variables directly into the procedure for estimating spot curves so that the spot rates determined for any bond are not only a function of the Moody's risk class to which the bond belongs, but the rates are conditional on all of the variables we have found important in the previous section. The spot rates developed from this procedure can then be used to price bonds and the resulting model prices compared with model prices arrived at only using Moody's ratings.

We modify the Nelson-Siegel estimation approach to take added influences into account. Because of the number of influences we found important and the number of parameters, as well as ratios and cross products of parameters in the Nelson-Siegel procedure we needed to make some simplifying assumptions about the nature of changes in the term structure caused by adding these influences. We assumed that each of the variables discussed in the previous section of this paper could effect the level but not the shape of the corporate term structure. For example, the estimation procedure assumes that the Baa+ and Baa- spot term structure curves are parallel to each other and the Baa spot term structure curve. To the extent that this simplification of the effect of variables is inappropriate it will bias our results against attributing importance to the influences we examine.

The new equation used to estimate the term structure for any bond with a particular Moody's rating is found by using the following modification of equation (3)

$$r_{ot} = a_0 + (a_1 + a_2) \left[ \frac{1 - e^{-a_3 t}}{a_3 t} \right] - a_2 e^{-a_3 t} + \sum_{j=1} b_j V_{ij} \quad (4)$$

This equation was estimated within each Moody's risk class for industrial and financial bonds separately. This allowed us to estimate a spot curve for any bond and to arrive at a model price based on these spots.

The results of this analysis are shown in Table X.<sup>10</sup> In this table we show the average absolute errors from using equation (4) to value Baa, A and Aa rated bonds for industrial and financial companies for two five-year periods and the overall ten-year period. The average absolute error varies from 37 cents per 100 bond for the financial Aa category up to 92.4 cents for the industrial Baa rated category.

How can we judge the improvement from incorporating these additional factors? One way is to compare these errors with the errors when rating alone is accepted as a metric for homogeneous risk. In each of the six categories for the ten-year period and for 11 of the 12 five-

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<sup>10</sup> The numbers here are somewhat different from those shown in Table 2 because the sample is changed since we require information on all variables rather than just price.

year categories the error has been reduced. In each of these eleven cases, the reduction in model error is statistically significant at the one percent level<sup>11</sup>. Note that since the spot rates are estimated each month, and since all the information is known at that time, the improvement in model pricing errors is attainable by researchers or investors.

We wish to get a better measure of the improvement in estimates of the spot yield curve with our added set of variables. When we only employ risk class as a measure of homogeneity pricing errors will tend to persist over time for three reasons: (1) because the additional qualities of a bond not captured by risk class would be expected to impact the price and since these qualities change slowly over time, if at all, we should observe persistence, (2) firm effects may be present and (3) dealer prices may be sticky since dealers may not correct their misestimation quickly over time.

One way to correct for all three of these reasons is to adjust the price predicted for a bond by past errors in pricing the bond<sup>12</sup>. To measure this we used the average of the last six months' errors. Table X shows that introducing past errors in the analysis reduces the error based on Moodys ratings by a significant amount. For example, for Baa industrial bonds the size of the average absolute error is reduced from \$1.18 per \$100 bond to \$0.65. Recall that this reduction occurred because of omitting bond characteristics which should have been included in estimating

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<sup>11</sup> The t's associated with the differences in errors average 5.1 to 17.67 with the typical one about 10.

<sup>12</sup> The model price is reduced (increased) by the amount that the model price overestimated (underestimated) the bonds actual price.

bond spot rates, firm affects, and/or stickiness in dealer prices. We now estimate what percentage of this reduction is just due to omitting the set of bond characteristics we have been examining (equation 4). This is shown in the last column of table 10. For industrial bonds incorporating our set of fundamental characteristics into the estimates of spot rates accounts for a decrease of between 40% and 48% of the aggregate impact of the three influences discussed above. We have not been quite as successful for financial bonds but we have reduced the error by 12% to 44%. This analysis shows that the set of variables we have examined are important influences in determining the risk structure of corporate bonds and capture a significant portion of the influences that affect bond prices beyond that captured by rating class.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we explore the characteristics of corporate bonds that effect their price. All rating-based techniques involve working with a homogeneous population of bonds. We explore what characteristics of bonds are priced differently by the market. We find that several characteristics of bonds and bond rating beyond the simple rating categories of Moody's and Standard and Poor convey information about the pricing of corporate bonds. In particular the following five influences are important:

1. The finer rating categories introduced by both rating agencies when combined with maturity measures.
2. Differences between S&P and Moody's ratings.
3. Differences in the rating of a bond and the rating of the company which issued that bond.
4. The coupon on the bond.
5. Whether a bond is new and has traded for more than one year.

We adjust for these characteristics and show the improvement in pricing error. Bond pricing models which are based on ratings whether the models involve discounting cash flows or determining risk neutral probabilities need to be adjusted for these influences.

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Panel (A) : Mean absolute pricing errors over the full time period (1/1987 to 12/1996)

Risk Category	Unadjusted Errors (a)	Errors adjusted by		Fraction of error
		previous months' errors (Time Series Adjustment) (b)	Bond characteristics (Characteristics Adjustment) (c)	reduction from adjustment obtained by Characteristics Adjustment) $d = (a-c)/(a-b)$
Financial AA	0.378	0.367	0.282	11.72%
Financial A	0.618	0.527	0.412	44.49%
Financial BBB	0.899	0.812	0.598	28.77%
Industrial AA	0.482	0.415	0.320	41.57%
Industrial A	0.648	0.553	0.410	39.99%
Industrial BBB	1.182	0.924	0.646	48.5%

**Table I**  
**Pricing Errors based on Rating Classes**

This table shows the average pricing errors when promised payments are discounted at the corporate rates. Discounted rates on promised payments were fitted each month separately for each rating category of bonds. Errors are the fitted prices minus the invoice prices of coupon bonds. Errors are expressed in dollars on bonds with face value of 100 dollars.

	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
	Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Average pricing errors	-0.0094	-0.0104	-0.0149	-0.0162	-0.0082	0.0094
Average absolute pricing errors	0.335	0.593	0.884	0.475	0.625	1.172

**Table II (a)**  
**Model Errors due to Maturity and Gradations within Ratings**  
**Industrial Sector**

Moody's rates bonds using broad categories as well as finer gradations (+, 0, and -.) Plus securities are designated as less risky than minus securities. This table separates bonds into groups according to these finer gradations (along the left-hand side.) It further separates the bonds according to maturity (in years from left to right.) The first column represents bonds with maturity between 1.0 and 2.0 years, inclusive. Model price is calculated by discounting promised cash flows at estimated corporate spot rates. Average error is defined as model price minus invoice price.

AA							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	34	130	129	108	172	18	591
0	360	634	509	365	398	62	2328
-	228	452	448	502	559	75	2264
Average Error							
+	-0.112	+0.152	-0.360	-0.255	-0.517	+0.113	-0.245
0	-0.045	+0.015	-0.004	-0.065	-0.009	+0.216	-0.010
-	-0.084	-0.030	-0.061	+0.095	+0.227	-0.378	+0.038
A							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	707	1364	1425	1176	1173	178	6023
0	752	1549	1692	1423	1641	200	7257
-	511	1092	1423	1481	1613	275	6395
Average Error							
+	-0.171	-0.288	-0.504	-0.524	-0.622	-0.531	-0.443
0	+0.005	+0.111	+0.078	+0.145	+0.133	-0.160	+0.096
-	+0.095	+0.237	+0.225	+0.279	+0.391	+0.355	+0.277
BBB							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	361	866	889	864	1257	66	4303
0	324	938	1068	965	1255	149	4699
-	393	1037	1039	1094	1236	93	4892
Average Error							
+	-0.374	-0.684	-0.932	-0.839	-1.009	-1.415	-0.846
0	-0.242	-0.039	-0.116	-0.266	-0.278	-0.500	-0.196
-	+0.391	+0.567	+0.662	+1.013	+1.287	+1.509	+0.873

**Table II (b)**  
**Model Errors due to Maturity and Gradations within Ratings**  
**Financial Sector**

AA							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	218	207	36	47	44	0	552
0	306	616	642	420	294	12	2290
-	1284	2081	1283	705	551	44	5948
Average Error							
+	-0.044	-0.055	-0.131	-0.283	-0.369	-	-0.100
0	-0.049	0.014	-0.066	-0.055	0.046	-0.707	-0.029
-	-0.025	0.056	-0.062	-0.024	0.166	0.064	0.014
A							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	1838	3131	2146	1486	1475	110	10186
0	2100	4014	2604	2134	2378	222	13452
-	903	2112	2352	2352	2168	262	10149
Average Error							
+	-0.112	-0.179	-0.491	-0.575	-0.646	-0.288	-0.359
0	-0.065	-0.025	-0.143	-0.127	-0.038	-0.163	-0.075
-	0.163	0.460	0.368	0.417	0.608	0.173	0.426
BBB							
Number of Bonds							
	1.0 - 2.0	2.01-4.0	4.01-6.0	6.01-8.0	8.01-10.0	10.01-10.99	Overall
+	843	1562	1092	1157	1499	123	6276
0	333	568	831	758	836	64	3390
-	131	228	254	350	365	4	1332
Average Error							
+	-0.168	0.020	-0.255	-0.227	-0.224	-0.128	-0.160
0	0.062	0.118	-0.231	-0.135	0.110	0.142	-0.031
-	0.225	0.349	0.982	0.799	1.036	0.766	0.765

**Table III**  
**Predictability of Rating Changes by Past Rating Changes**

This table examines whether the direction of rating change (i.e. upgrade or downgrade) in year  $t-1$  can predict the direction of rating change in year  $t$ . Each year, each issuer was put into one of the nine cells depending on the direction of rating change in year  $t-1$  and year  $t$ . This procedure was repeated for all the active issuers in a given year to arrive at a 3 by 3 table showing the number of issuers in each cell. The table shown below is the average of these tables over the 10-year period 1987 to 1996. It shows the average number of issuers per annum undergoing the particular type of rating transitions.

	year t upgrade	year t no change	year t downgrade
year t-1 upgrade	24.7	123.4	9.4
year t-1 no change	135.2	1192.9	197.0
year t-1 downgrade	25.9	157.2	56.7

**Table IV**  
**Model Errors due to Recent Company Rating Changes**

For each risk class (e.g., Financial Sector, AA bonds), specific bonds were chosen for which the issuing company experienced a rating change. The pricing errors, model price minus invoice price (using equation 4), were then placed into six bins. The bins are separated along two different dimensions: direction of rating change (Up or Down) and number of months after rating change (month of rating change, the following three months, and the subsequent fifteen months.) Panel A gives the number of observations in each bin. Because this table covers the entire sample of ten years, some bonds are observed many times. This results in the number of bonds in a given risk class being roughly proportional to the number of months in the bin. Panel B gives the average error for each bin. Units are dollars per \$100 bond.

Direction	Months after Change	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
		Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Panel A: Number of Pricing Error Observations in Bin							
Up	4 to 15	24	1904	476	258	645	422
Up	1 to 3	6	506	138	58	139	131
Up	0	2	161	53	12	42	50
Down	0	1	104	19	12	38	62
Down	1 to 3	3	307	63	36	112	213
Down	4 to 15	12	1296	267	162	475	737
Panel B: Average Error in Bin							
Up	4 to 15	0.937	-0.081	-0.469	-0.241	-0.120	0.065
Up	1 to 3	0.838	-0.078	-0.486	-0.137	-0.043	-0.344
Up	0	1.306	-0.019	-0.502	-0.446	-0.015	-0.166
Down	0	0.465	0.096	-0.569	-0.185	0.567	0.431
Down	1 to 3	0.413	-0.057	-0.090	-0.231	0.725	0.263
Down	4 to 15	0.201	0.113	0.065	-0.157	0.847	0.174

**Table V****Model Errors due to Differences between Moody's and Standard and Poors**

This table examines whether bonds whose S&P rating is different from Moody's rating are viewed by the market as having different risks. Model errors are model price minus invoice price. Units are dollars per \$100 bond.

	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
	Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Panel A: Number of Pricing Error Observations						
S&P Lower	2075	4557	1720	841	4281	3111
S&P Same	5198	18537	3481	2906	9459	6639
S&P Higher	1456	10465	5702	1432	5875	4062
Panel B: Average Error						
S&P Lower	0.015	0.253	0.117	0.080	0.010	0.212
S&P Same	-0.020	-0.085	0.009	0.063	0.052	0.000
S&P Higher	-0.086	-0.000	-0.066	-0.232	-0.138	-0.237

**Table VI**  
**Model Errors due to Bond Age**

This table examines the effect of age on pricing errors. The data was separated into two groups: one whose bonds were issued within a year of observation and another whose bonds were older than a year. Panel A gives the number of bonds in each group. Panel B gives the average error for each group. Error is defined as model price minus invoice price. Units are dollars per \$100 bond.

	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
	Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Panel A: Number of Pricing Error Observations						
First Year	2663	8501	2786	1116	4294	3298
Older	6071	24692	8021	3912	14728	10288
Panel B: Average Error						
First Year	-0.121	-0.189	-0.059	-0.210	-0.201	-0.268
Older	0.047	0.051	0.009	0.039	0.045	0.058

**Table VII**  
**Errors for Industrial Baa Bonds sorted by coupon and maturity**

Panel (B) of this table shows the errors from discounting the promised payments for Baa rated bonds of industrial category. The errors are model prices minus the invoice prices. The columns are different maturity ranges and the rows are different coupon ranges. Panel (A) shows the number of bonds over which the averaging was done in each cell. Units are dollars per \$100.

Panel (A): Number of bonds

	[1,2) years	[2,4) years	[4,6) years	[6,8) years	[8,10) years	[10,11) years
[0,5)%	57	58	0	0	0	0
[5,6.5)%	112	279	156	84	190	1
[6.5,8)%	144	501	584	774	1562	115
[8,9.5)%	470	1200	1185	1149	1273	125
[9.5,11)%	258	624	954	853	722	103
[11,15)%	69	179	116	70	12	2

Panel (B): Average errors

	[1,2) years	[2,4) years	[4,6) years	[6,8) years	[8,10) years	[10,11) years
[0,5)%	-0.4363	-0.6707	.	.	.	.
[5,6.5)%	-0.0381	-0.5762	-1.1603	-0.9723	-1.3549	-1.4769
[6.5,8)%	-0.0575	0.2403	-0.1202	-0.1021	-0.3126	-0.2746
[8,9.5)%	0.0497	0.0646	-0.0820	-0.0968	0.0789	-0.6200
[9.5,11)%	-0.0937	-0.0415	0.0991	0.4165	1.0066	0.6395
[11,15)%	0.2479	0.4590	0.7475	1.5713	2.5329	2.4079
Weighted Average	-0.0190	0.0192	-0.0558	0.0660	0.0298	-0.1153

**Table VIII****Model Errors due to Differences in Bond and Company Rating**

Each risk class is separated into three groups, one in which the bond is rated higher than the issuing company, one in which the bond is rated lower than the issuing company, and one in which the bond and the issuing company are equally rated. Panel A gives the number of bond price observations for each group of bonds. Panel B gives the average error, defined as model price minus invoice price. Units are dollars per \$100 bond.

Bond Rating is ...	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
	Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Panel A: Number of Pricing Error Observations						
Higher	3385	1737	145	1211	4355	1108
Same	5086	19261	1839	3420	14201	9537
Lower	2	11396	8344	0	888	2604
Panel B: Average Error						
Higher	0.006	0.588	0.887	0.306	0.147	0.854
Same	-0.040	-0.025	0.427	-0.168	-0.027	0.093
Lower	-0.097	-0.105	-0.135	-	-0.615	-0.866

**Table IX**

This table presents regression results ... Age < 1.0 is one if the bond age is less than 1.0 years. Company > Bond is one if the company rating is better than the bond rating. Bond > Company is one if the bond rating is better than the company rating. Plus is one if the bond has a plus rating (eg., Aa+). Minus is one if the bond has a negative rating. S&P > Moody's is one if Standard and Poor rated the bond as less risky than Moody's did. Moody's > S&P is one if Moody's rated the bond as less risky than Standard and Poor did. Coupon is the bond's coupon rate.

Variable	Financial Sector			Industrial Sector		
	Aa	A	Baa	Aa	A	Baa
Panel A: Number of Pricing Error Observations						
Intercept	-0.022*	-0.018*	0.423*	-0.093*	0.082*	-0.195*
Plus * maturity	-0.008	-0.055*	-0.005*	-0.010*	-0.069*	-0.071*
Minus * maturity	0.014*	0.061*	0.123*	-0.003	0.030*	0.159*
S&P > Moody's	-0.274*	-0.283*	-0.124*	-0.109*	-0.257*	-0.086*
Moody's > S&P	0.035**	0.147*	0.456*	0.333*	0.167*	0.982*
Coupon	0.051*	0.059*	0.071*	0.110*	0.101*	0.155*
Age < 1.0	-0.135*	-0.119*	-0.083*	-0.224*	-0.155*	-0.210*
Company > Bond	0.059	-0.010	-0.570*	-	-0.222*	-0.407*
Bond > Company	0.018	0.487*	0.183	0.379*	0.075*	0.686*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.053	0.219	0.109	0.182	0.184	0.325

\* indicates the coefficient is different from zero at the 1% level of significance \*\* 5% level of significance