

## **Does Public Ownership of Equity Improve Earnings Quality?**

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## Does Public Ownership of Equity Improve Earnings Quality?

### Abstract

We compare the quality of accounting numbers produced by two types of public firms – those with publicly-traded equity and those with privately-held equity that are nonetheless considered public by virtue of having publicly-traded debt. We develop and test two hypotheses. The “demand” hypothesis holds that earnings of public equity firms are of higher quality than earnings of private equity firms due to stronger demand by investors and creditors for quality reporting. In contrast, the “opportunistic behavior” hypothesis posits that public equity firms, because their managers have a greater incentive to manage earnings, have lower earnings quality than their private equity peers. Assessing various attributes of earnings quality, the results indicate that, consistent with the “opportunistic behavior” hypothesis, private equity firms have higher quality accruals and a lower propensity to manage income than public equity firms. However, in line with the “demand” hypothesis, public equity firms’ financial reports are generally more conservative.

**Keywords:** accruals, conservatism, earnings management, earnings quality, private and public firms.

**Data availability:** Data are available from sources identified in the study.

# **Does Public Ownership of Equity Improve Earnings Quality?**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The quality of accounting information is influenced by an array of factors, most of which stem from the demand for such information for use in contractual arrangements and from the incentives and opportunities of management to manage the reported numbers. Both the demand for quality accounting information for contractual purposes and management incentives to adjust the reported earnings are likely to be influenced by whether the equity of the company is privately held or publicly traded. In this study, we examine the differential earnings quality of private equity and public equity firms in order to shed light on how public ownership of equity affects the quality of firms' earnings. Because earnings "quality" has multiple dimensions, in our tests we examine a number of attributes that have been associated by previous research with the notion of earnings quality.

The influence that public or private ownership has on the quality of accounting numbers has been examined in limited contexts by past studies. Beatty et al. (2002), Burgstahler et al. (2006), and Penno and Simon (1986) focus on the difference between public and private firms with respect to one dimension of earnings quality – the extent to which earnings are managed. The association between ownership type and another dimension of quality, conservatism, is examined by Ball and Shivakumar (2005). Because financial data of privately-owned firms is generally unavailable, these studies are restricted to regulated industries such as banking and insurance where financial reports of both public and private companies are filed with industry regulators (e.g., Beatty et al. 2002) or to countries such as the U.K. where accounting information is available for private companies because they must publicly file financial statements (e.g., Ball and Shivakumar 2005).

The results of these studies on the differential earnings quality of public versus private companies are conflicting. Beatty et al. (2002) find that public firms have a greater propensity to manage earnings than private firms whereas Burgstahler et al. (2006) report the opposite results. This finding by Beatty et al. is ostensibly also in contrast to the finding by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) who use the extent of reporting conservatism to assess earnings quality.

The results of these studies, while insightful, cannot be easily generalized. The examination of firms in a regulated industry provides results for a single industry with unique financial reporting issues. Further, the extent to which the results based on samples consisting of

European companies, while not limited to regulated industries and therefore more generalizable, apply to U.S. firms is not clear due to differences in these countries reporting regimes.<sup>1</sup>

Our study extends the literature on the effect of ownership type on earnings quality by examining a broader sample of U.S. firms (in non-regulated industries) and considering a multitude of measures of earnings quality. Specifically, we compare the quality of accounting numbers between private and public equity firms along four dimensions: persistence of accruals, estimation error in the accrual process, prevalence of earnings management and conservatism.

Our sample of U.S. companies consists of two types of public companies: those with publicly-traded equity (hereafter, public equity firms) and those with privately-held equity that are considered public companies because they have publicly-traded debt (hereafter, private equity firms). Both types of firms are subject to identical SEC reporting and disclosure requirements. Hence, in our tests we control for many of the factors affecting the comparison of earnings quality across countries such as legal institutions, tax laws, securities regulations and the extent of their enforcement, as well as reporting and disclosure requirements. We are thus able to identify more precisely how the ownership structure of the company affects its earnings quality. Relying on this unique sample of U.S. companies and on a broader set of earnings quality attributes, our study sheds light on the question of the effect of ownership type on earnings quality. Further, it resolves the question of whether the apparent conflicting results of past studies are due to differences in the examined samples or an inherent negative association between the different measures employed to assess earnings quality.

The findings indicate that the quality of the accounting numbers produced by public equity and private equity firms exhibit different reporting attributes. However, neither group “dominates” the other in terms of having higher overall quality reporting. Public equity firms generally report more conservatively, one dimension of reporting quality. However, private equity firms’ financial reports exhibit considerably less earnings management, another dimension of reporting quality.

The study is the first to analyze the quality of accounting information generated by firms whose debt, but not equity, is publicly traded and to contrast it with that of public equity firms. We further examine the different incentives and opportunities that management of these two

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<sup>1</sup> A related line of research explores the factors that influence the accounting quality of publicly-traded firms across countries. These international comparisons examine various quality attributes of accounting information, particularly conservatism (e.g., Ball et al. 2000; Ball et al. 2003; Bushman and Piotroski 2006; Pope and Walker 1999).

types of firms has to affect the reported numbers.<sup>2</sup> By extending the literature on earnings quality and the differential quality between public versus private companies, the study enhances our understanding of how, and the extent to which, management incentives and investors' demand for earnings quality impact financial reporting. It further augments the broader stream of research on the association between other ownership types (such as family-controlled firms, non-profit and governmental entities) and financial reporting attributes.<sup>3</sup>

The study contributes to the existing research in two main respects. First, a broad spectrum of attributes related to the concept of earnings quality are considered rather than a single attribute of earnings quality such as conservatism or earnings management. Second, by examining a unique sample of privately-held public companies, the study highlights how the presence of public equity investors affects management's reporting behavior, controlling for the regulatory environment as well as the disclosure and reporting regimes.

The remainder of the study is organized as follows. In the next section, the characteristics of the sample firms are described. The hypotheses are developed in the third section, followed by a discussion of the various measures used to assess earnings quality. The sample and data are described in Section V. The results are provided in Section VI. Concluding remarks are provided in the last section of the paper.

## **II. PRIVATE EQUITY FIRMS WITH PUBLIC DEBT**

Under Sections 13 and 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, firms with publicly-traded equity as well as those with privately-held equity and publicly-traded debt are subject to identical financial reporting and disclosure regulations. While both are considered to be public firms, private equity firms differ from public equity firms in various ways because their shares are not publicly traded. For example, the compensation packages of managers of private equity firms do not include equity-based compensation tied to stock prices. Similarly, because of the lack of publicly-traded stock, takeovers of these firms cannot be affected through open market stock purchases.

There is a large body of theoretical literature examining the motivations for becoming a public company. These motivations include obtaining increased liquidity (Amihud and Mendelson 1988), having greater access to capital (Welch 1989), optimizing the exit opportunity

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<sup>2</sup> As noted later in the paper, in order to focus directly on the impact of equity ownership, we control for the role of public debt by including in our sample only public equity firms that also have public debt.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ali et al. (2007), Basu et al. (2005) and Wang (2006) on the disclosure characteristics of family-controlled firms and Krishnan et al. (2006) on the disclosure and reporting behavior of charities.

for current shareholders (Zingales 1995; Mello and Parsons 1998; Stoughton and Zechner 1998; Black and Gilson 1998), diversifying the founding shareholders' wealth (Leland and Pyle 1977) and improving the owners' ability to monitor the firms' managers (Jensen and Meckling 1976; Pagano and Röell 1998; Holmström and Tirole 1993; Bolton and von Thadden 1998). Implicit or explicit in this literature is the assumption that becoming public means having public ownership. However, a private firm could also become public by issuing public debt. Some of the benefits of public ownership, such as creating an easier exit for the owners or generating greater liquidity for current shareholders, do not exist for private firms that issue public debt while others, such as improving owners' monitoring capability, might. Indeed, there has been little attention paid by the literature to the various factors that influence a firm's choice "to go public" by issuing public equity or public debt. Helwege and Packer (2003) show that among public debt firms, those that have private equity are younger, more leveraged and appear to have fewer growth opportunities than public equity firms. Similar findings are reported by Katz (2008) who compares firm characteristics of privately-held firms before and after their equity IPO. We confirm these results in this study: As reported later, our sample of companies with public debt that are privately owned are more leveraged, have lower growth rates and are less profitable than firms with public debt that are have publicly-held equity.

The factors that lead private equity owners to issue public debt instead of, or prior to, issuing public equity, while having a bearing on the "pecking order" theory, have not been directly researched. However, research on the priority of financing sources suggests that issuing public debt involves more costly disclosure of propriety information than does issuing private debt (Campbell 1979; Myers 1984; Yosha 1995). Other things being equal, one would thus expect firms to rely more on private debt when the public disclosure of firm-specific information is costlier.<sup>4</sup> Credit quality also appears to play a role in firms' debt financing decisions. Empirical evidence indicates that firms with higher credit ratings tend to borrow from public sources, those with intermediate ratings borrow from banks, and firms with the lowest credit quality borrow from private lenders (Denis and Mihov 2003; Bharath et al. 2008). These findings suggest that firms that issue public debt are likely to be financially stronger than firms that do not have publicly-held debt, an expectation borne out by our sample firms (as presented in section VI).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this argument see Dhaliwal et al. (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Holders of public debt are protected by the Trust Indenture Act of 1939 which requires that firms receive the unanimous consent of the public debt holders to modify the terms of the bond indenture agreements. Given the dispersed holdings of most bond issues, this unanimity requirement is likely to make it more difficult for public debt holders to renegotiate debt contracts and to effectively monitor the borrowing firm's performance as compared to private lenders. (Smith and Warner (1979) discuss standard contractual arrangements for public and private debt.)

The discussion above suggests that the decision about which type of public security to issue, debt or equity, is endogenous. Therefore as explained below, our tests on the association between financial reporting attributes and ownership type control for firm characteristics related to this choice.

### **III. HYPOTHESES ON EARNINGS QUALITY AND OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE**

A natural starting point for developing hypotheses about the quality of financial reporting of private equity firms with publicly-traded debt is to consider those posed by previous research on the differential quality of financial reports for public versus private firms. Interestingly, these hypotheses lead to conflicting predictions. On one hand, the demand for high quality reporting by public equity firms is hypothesized to be stronger since accounting information is the main type of information contractually available to public equity holders. In addition, public equity firms have stronger incentives to improve their accounting and disclosure policies and enhance their financial transparency so as to mitigate potential lawsuits (consistent with the findings of Skinner 1997). Further, public equity firms may have a stronger incentive to report in a more transparent manner (e.g., more conservatively) so as to reduce the cost of their equity capital.

Based on these considerations, the demand for high quality accounting information is expected to be greater for public equity firms than for private equity firms. This “demand” hypothesis is advanced by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) and, by implication, to studies on the differential demand for financial reporting quality between countries that resolve information asymmetries via “insider access” as compared with countries that alleviate such asymmetries through “arm’s length” public disclosures.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, management of public firms is under continuous pressure by investors to meet certain performance benchmarks. For example, management has incentives to manage earnings to meet analysts’ forecasts (e.g., DeGeorge et al. 1999; Bartov et al. 2002) or to avoid reporting losses (e.g., Hayn 1995; Burgstahler and Dichev 1997) or earnings decreases (e.g., Burgstahler and Dichev 1997; Barth et al. 1999). Further, management may have a personal stake in the firm’s stock price as a result of having stock-based compensation or stock ownership. In contrast, managers of private firms are not exposed to stock market repercussions arising from financial disclosures nor are they as likely to be as influenced by incentives arising from stock-

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<sup>6</sup> International evidence is consistent with insider access and high quality public financial reporting being substitutes for reducing information asymmetries. Similar evidence is provided by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) with respect to private companies (where there is greater insider access) and public companies (shown to have more timely loss recognition).

based compensation.<sup>7</sup> In addition, because private firms are more closely held, they tend to have fewer shareholders. Those owners are likely to be more closely involved in the management of the firm and thus face a lower cost of acquiring information, thereby reducing management's incentive to manage earnings.<sup>8</sup> This "opportunistic behavior" hypothesis which posits that, because of stock price considerations, the propensity of managers of public equity firms to manage earnings is greater than that of managers of private equity firms is supported by the findings of Beatty et al. (2002) and the survey results of Penno and Simon (1986).

Arguably, earnings management could be present among private equity firms. Managers of private firms may have incentives to manage earnings due to the presence of earnings-based bonuses as well as to avoid violating of earnings-based debt covenants. Further, the latitude to manage earnings may be present since private equity firms are likely to be less exposed than public equity firms to litigation risk and cost of equity capital considerations. The extent to which these two types of firms engage in earnings management is an empirical issue. However, because of the strength of the *a priori* arguments in its favor, the null version of the "opportunistic behavior" hypothesis is stated as a one-sided hypothesis, namely, that managers in public equity firms have a stronger incentive to manage earnings than their private equity counterparts.

The "demand" and "opportunistic behavior" hypotheses are not mutually exclusive and may, in fact, both be valid. (A discussion of this point is provided in Section IV.) The observed differential in financial reporting quality likely reflects the net effect of the two influences.

Even though we do not examine "purely" private firms, that is, firms that are privately owned and have no public debt, these firms are hypothesized to have weaker demand for accounting quality and weaker incentives to manage income than privately owned firms with public debt. Public debt holders of privately owned firms are likely to demand high accounting quality. Unlike private lenders, public debt holders are not privy to inside information before extending credit nor are they entitled to receive information on the extent of compliance with the terms of the debt contract beyond that contained in the prospectus and in subsequent SEC-

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<sup>7</sup> To gain insight into the compensation arrangements for private-equity firms, we examined a sample of private firms with public debt that subsequently issued public equity. For each of these firms, we compared the CEO's compensation package prior to the IPO (when the firm was private but had public debt) and subsequent to the IPO. The findings indicate that earnings-based compensation is as frequent in the pre-IPO period as it is in the post-IPO period. Further, the percentage of CEOs receiving stock options as part of their compensation package does not increase significantly after the IPO although, as might be expected, the monetary value of the options is significantly larger after the IPO. This evidence is indicative of the differences in the compensation structure of public and private equity firms.

<sup>8</sup> The costlier monitoring by the diffused ownership of publicly-owned firms may be mitigated by improvements in audit quality and corporate governance. As we report later (in table 1), the quality of audit, as gauged by the size of the audit firm, is not significantly different between the two groups of firms although other corporate governance indicators (not tabulated) such as board size do change when a private firm becomes public.

mandated public reports and disclosures.<sup>9</sup> Because they have less access to private information, less effective ways of monitoring and disciplining management, and less efficient tools for liquidation or renegotiation in the event of financial distress than private lenders, public debt holders will have a greater demand for high quality accounting numbers. Further, since public debt holders have less access to private information than private lenders, firms with public debt, whether publicly or privately owned, have stronger incentives to manage earnings than firms with no debt or with only private debt. Still, this “opportunistic behavior” is hypothesized to be less pronounced among private equity firms since capital market considerations are not a concern for these firms except, perhaps, in situations where a firm is on the brink of violating its debt covenants or making a public equity offering. Further, managers of private equity firms with public debt are less likely to have their compensation tied to the price of their firm’s traded securities (bonds) than their peers in firms with publicly-traded stock.

Since the demand for accounting quality as well as the opportunistic behavior of managers of public equity firms may be affected by whether they have public debt, we control for the presence of public debt by comparing the accounting quality of private equity firms with public debt to the accounting quality of public equity firms with public debt.

The predictions of the two hypotheses with respect to accounting quality of firms with different types of stakeholders are summarized in figure one. For completeness, we also include the predictions for the group of entirely private firms (private equity and private debt) for which no information is publicly available in the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Theoretical and empirical evidence suggest that access to information and the strength of the monitoring mechanism is likely to differ between public and private debt. For example, some studies hypothesize that private debt financing has an advantage over public debt in terms of monitoring efficiency (e.g., Diamond 1984; Boyd and Prescott 1986; Berlin and Loyes 1988), access to private information (Fama 1985) and the efficiency of liquidation and renegotiation in financial distress (Chemmanur and Fulghieri 1994; Gertner and Scharfstein 1991). The empirical evidence is generally consistent with these expectations (e.g., Kwan and Carlton 2003). See Johnson (1997) for a summary of these findings.

<sup>10</sup> Private equity firms with private debt that have more than 500 investors and at least \$10 million in net assets are required to file reports with the SEC. (See <http://www.sec.gov/investor/pubs/cyberfraud.htm>). However, the vast majority of these firms are cooperatives, which are likely to differ from corporations in terms of earnings management and quality of reporting due to differences in organizational and ownership structures.

**Figure 1**  
**Type of Ownership and Expected Quality of Financial Reporting**

Hypothesis	Type of Ownership		
	Private Firms	Public Firms	
	Private Equity, Private Debt	Private Equity, Public Debt	Public Equity, Public Debt
<b>“Demand” Hypothesis</b>	Weak demand for quality external reporting	Greater demand for quality external reporting from debt holders	Strong demand for quality external reporting from both equity and debt holders
<i>Predicted Quality of Financial Reporting</i>			
<b>“Opportunistic Behavior” Hypothesis</b>	Low incentive to manage accounting numbers	Greater incentives to manage accounting numbers	Strong incentives to manage accounting numbers
<i>Predicted Quality of Financial Reporting</i>			

An additional characteristic that could affect earnings management and that may differ between public and private firms is the degree of ownership concentration. High ownership concentration, while creating the ability and incentives for managers to manage reported earnings, leads at the same time to a closer and more effective scrutiny of management by the major shareholders. As a result, the net effect on the extent of earnings management is not obvious. The evidence, however, is more consistent with the notion of a positive association of ownership concentration and earnings management. For example, Leuz et al. (2003) find a significant positive correlation between earnings management and ownership concentration across countries. Similarly, Haw et al. (2004) document that firms with a larger concentration of “control-to-cash flow rights” exhibit higher levels of earnings management. Although not controlling for ownership concentration works against rejecting our null hypothesis of greater earnings management among publicly-owned firms, to explore this issue further we conduct tests on a subsample of firms with sufficient data to control for the level of ownership concentration.<sup>11</sup>

In comparing the quality of accounting numbers between private equity, public debt firms and public equity, public debt firms (the second and third groups, respectively, in figure one), it is

<sup>11</sup> Another factor that could affect both earnings management and conservatism is the extent of management ownership. Because of the conflicting predictions and findings regarding the effect of management ownership concentration (e.g., Warfield et al. 1995; Yeo et al. 2002; LaFond and Roychowdhury 2007), difficulty in obtaining management ownership data, and evidence suggesting that the extent of management ownership is not significantly different between private and public companies (Katz 2008), we do not control for this factor in our tests.

important to keep in mind that the choice between public and private debt is endogenous and positively associated with firm characteristics such as size, leverage, age and amount of debt issued (Houston and James 1996; Johnson 1997; Krishnaswami et al. 1999; Cantillo and Wright 2000). Further, both theoretical models and the empirical evidence suggest that firms with the highest credit quality tend to borrow from public sources whereas lower quality borrowers rely more on private debt (Cantillo and Wright 2000; Denis and Mihov 2003; Bharath et al. 2008). This discussion further emphasizes the need to control for an array of firm attributes (e.g., size and leverage) that are likely to affect both the public-private debt choice as well as earnings quality when testing for differences in financial reporting quality between private equity firms and those public equity firms that *do not* have public debt.

#### IV. MEASURES OF ACCOUNTING QUALITY

The concept of earnings quality is elusive. The salient body of literature on “earnings quality” does not provide a clear definition of that “quality.” It does identify, however, different attributes that are associated with or reflective of “earnings quality.”

Penman and Zhang (2002), while recognizing the lack of consensus on the definition of earnings quality, define the term to mean that “reported earnings... is a good indicator of future earnings.” They consider high-quality earnings to be “sustainable earnings” and, correspondingly, deem an accounting system that produces unsustainable earnings as being of poor quality. They show that in addition to the disruptive effect on earnings sustainability caused by changes in accounting methods and estimates, hidden reserves (such as those created by the use of LIFO, the expensing of R&D or the use of depreciation parameters that lead to book depreciation being lower than the economic depreciation) reduce the sustainability of earnings by providing more opportunity for earnings management..

Richardson et al. (2005) and implicitly Sloan (1996) propose a related dimension of earnings quality which is “the degree to which earnings performance persists into the next period.” They also view conformity with GAAP (as captured by SEC enforcement actions) as a measure of earnings quality, an earnings quality measure also employed by Dechow et al. (1996) and Bradshaw et al. (2001).

Dechow and Dichev (2002) suggest another aspect of earnings quality-- the strength of the relation between current accruals and past, present and future cash flows. Accordingly, they propose a model for expected accruals and interpret the deviation from this “expected” value as the estimation error in accruals, which they use as a measure of earnings quality. This measure is

affected by firm characteristics such as the length of the business cycle as well as by earnings management.

Ball and Shivakumar (2005) define reporting quality in general terms as “the usefulness of financial statements to investors, creditors, managers and all other parties contracting with the firm.” This general definition notwithstanding, they examine a single dimension of quality, “conditional conservatism” using two measures: Basu’s (1997) measure of the differential persistence of losses versus profits and the differential effect of economic gains and losses on the cash-accrual association.

In summary, no single measure of accounting numbers captures all of the dimensions of earnings quality. Previous studies have identified a number of attributes associated with different aspects of earnings quality such as accrual persistence, estimation errors in the accrual process, absence of earnings management and conservatism. We use these quality attributes as discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Accrual persistence**

Our first measure of earnings quality is based on the differential persistence of accruals relative to cash flows. This earnings quality measure has been articulated by Richardson et al. (2005) as “the degree to which earnings performance persists into the next period.” Persistence is gauged using the following regression:

$$OI_{i,t+1} = \alpha + \beta_1 CF_{i,t} + \beta_2 ACCR_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \quad (1)$$

where OI is operating income after depreciation, CF is the operating cash flow component of earnings defined as OI minus ACCR and ACCR is the accrual component of earnings measured as the change in net operating assets (NOA) from year t-1 to t. In regression (1) and throughout the paper, the subscripts i and t refer to the firm and year, respectively.<sup>12</sup> All variables in equation (1) are standardized by  $NOA_{t-1}$ . The incremental contribution of accruals is determined by the magnitude and significance of  $\beta_2$ .

We account for the possible endogeneity in the decision to issue public equity by using the Heckman (1979) two-stage procedure, following the approach used by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) and Katz (2008). In the first stage, size (measured alternatively as total assets and sales), growth in sales, leverage (defined as total debt divided by total assets), profitability (defined as operating income divided by net operating assets, RNOA), the quick ratio (defined as current assets excluding inventory and prepaid expenses divided by current liabilities), age (years since

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<sup>12</sup> Net operating assets equal the book value of common and preferred equity, plus total debt, minus the sum of cash, short-term investments and investment and advances, plus minority interest.

incorporation), auditor quality (a dummy variable receiving the value 1 (0) if the firm is (is not) audited by one of the large national firms (the Big 4, Big 5 or Big 8, depending on the time period)), and the length of the operating cycle (the sum of the average collection period and days in inventory) serve as predictors of the equity choice in a PROBIT model.<sup>13</sup> Estimates of the PROBIT model are used to compute the inverse Mills ratio for each sample firm. In the second stage, we include the inverse Mills ratio as a control variable in regression (1), allowing the coefficient to vary between the two groups of firms.<sup>14</sup>

### **Estimation error in the accruals process**

Accruals provide information about future cash flows. To the extent that the accruals process is free of estimation errors, accruals and earnings will be more representative of future cash flows. Building on this notion, the second attribute of earnings quality that we consider is the degree of stability in the relation between cash flows and accruals. A measure used to assess the degree of stability proposed by Dechow and Dichev (2002) and modified by McNichols (2002) and Francis et al. (2005) is based on the variance of the residuals from the following model:

$$TCA_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CFO_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 CFO_{i,t} + \beta_3 CFO_{i,t+1} + \beta_4 \Delta Rev_{i,t} + \beta_5 PPE_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

where TCA is total current accruals,<sup>15</sup> CFO is cash flows from operations (measured as income from continuing operations less total accruals where total accruals equal total current accruals minus the depreciation and amortization expense),  $\Delta Rev$  is the change in revenues from year t-1 to t and PPE is the balance of property, plant and equipment (on a gross basis). All variables in (2) are scaled by average total assets in year t.

In line with Francis et al. (2005), we estimate regression (2) cross-sectionally for each industry (defined by two-digit SIC codes) with at least 20 firm observations in a given year. Our second quality measure is the variability (assessed by the standard deviation) of the residuals

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<sup>13</sup> Extending this test, we included proxies for expected growth (average of the realized annual growth in sales in the subsequent three years), proximity to covenant violation (net income before interest divided by the standard deviation of ten years of net income before interest), and ownership concentration (a dummy variable receiving the value of 1 (0) if the firm has (does not have) concentrated ownership (defined as private equity firms, which presumably have high ownership concentration, and public equity firms in the top quartile of the distribution of the percentage of holdings by the top five institutional holders). The results of this extension (which due to data requirements is based on considerably smaller samples) are similar to those tabulated.

<sup>14</sup> We conducted all analyses on a subgroup of 223 private equity firms that once were, or later became, public equity firms. Each private equity firm thus serves as its own control, further mitigating endogeneity concerns. All results (untabulated) remain qualitatively similar.

<sup>15</sup> Total current accruals equal operating assets (current assets excluding cash and short term investments) minus operating liabilities (current liabilities excluding the current portion of long-term debt). Estimating regression (1) using total accruals and cash flows as defined in regression (2) produces similar results to those from the estimation of regression (1) as defined in the text (and tabulated in section VI).

from regression (2). The rationale underlying use of this measure is that the higher is the variability of the relation between earnings and cash flows, the lower is the quality of the accruals and, since earnings incorporate accruals, the lower is the quality of earnings.

Because the standard deviation of the accruals may reflect the volatility of the firm's operations rather than reporting quality per se (see Liu and Wysocki 2006), we follow the suggestion in Verdi (2006) and create an additional *relative* measure of accruals quality defined as the ratio of the standard deviation of the residuals from equation (2) to the standard deviation of total current accruals.<sup>16</sup>

### **Absence of earnings management**

It is difficult to determine the presence or absence of earnings management since the series of unmanaged earnings is not observable. However, certain patterns in earnings are considered indicative of the presence of earnings management. One such pattern is the concentration of earnings numbers just above some earnings threshold (DeGeorge et al. 1999). For example, earnings clustered just above zero have been interpreted as reflecting earnings management to avoid reporting a loss. Earnings growth in the current quarter relative to the same quarter the previous year of zero or a slightly positive amount may suggest that the current period's earnings have been managed to avoid reporting an earnings decline. Similarly, earnings that result in no, or just a small, positive earnings surprise are often viewed as having been managed to meet or just beat analysts' earnings forecasts.

In line with Burgstahler and Dichev (1997), we identify earnings management cases as those where the observed relative frequency of earnings that are just above (just below) an earnings threshold exceed (fall below) their theoretical values. For the purpose of this analysis, we divide the distribution of the earnings measure into "bins" with bin widths determined by the formula suggested by DeGeorge et al. (1999) and test for the significance of the difference between the actual and theoretical frequency in a bin based on the procedure proposed by Burgstahler and Dichev (1997).<sup>17</sup> To test whether the difference is statistically significant, we

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<sup>16</sup> Francis et al. (2005) and Verdi (2006) further differentiate between the component of accruals quality driven by operational characteristics over which management has limited control (such as the length of the operating cycle or firm size) and the discretionary component which reflects management choices. Because our basic observation is the industry/type of firm, our sample is fairly small (55 industries for the public equity sample and 24 industries for the private equity sample) making it difficult to obtain a reliable estimate of this "firm-characteristics-adjusted" accrual quality measure. However, since our comparison is done within industries, controlling for such operational characteristics is less critical.

<sup>17</sup> The bin width, BW, is determined as  $BW = 2(IQR)n^{-1/3}$ , where IQR is the sample inter-quartile range and n is the number of observations. To test the significance of the difference between the theoretical and actual relative frequencies in a bin, we evaluate the difference deflated by the estimated standard error of the difference. The

calculate the standardized differences for the interval just below zero, and the interval just above zero. Under the assumption of no earnings management, the expected number of observations in any given interval is equal to the average of the number of observations in the two adjacent intervals. If managers succeed in meeting the threshold, we would expect to find a shift of observations from the bins just below the earnings threshold to the bins just above that threshold.

A number of studies expressed concerns regarding the effectiveness of this procedure to identify earnings management (e.g., Durtschi and Easton 2005; Beaver et al. 2004; Dechow et al. 2003). To increase the confidence that the cases occurring “just above” the identified thresholds are likely to represent earnings management, we follow Dechow et al. (2003) and investigate whether such cases have a higher proportion of positive unexpected discretionary accruals. To even more precisely pinpoint earnings management cases, we examine the percentage of the positive unexpected accruals cases where these accruals “made the difference” in meeting or beating the threshold. That is, we focus on cases where the magnitude of positive unexpected accruals was sufficiently positive so as to turn what would otherwise be a loss (or a decline in earnings) into a small profit (or increase in earnings). We identify “expected” or “nondiscretionary” accruals using the modified Jones model.<sup>18</sup>

Even though widely used in the earnings management literature, accruals models such as the modified Jones model are far from perfect in detecting earnings management. In particular, these models make certain assumptions about the functional relationship between accruals and activity measures such as sales or the level of plant, property and equipment that, while plausible, may not strictly hold. The models further assume that the relationships between cash flows and accruals are linear, thus ignoring the asymmetry in the gain and loss recognition of accruals. We incorporate the improvement in accruals models proposed by Ball and Shivakumar (2006) in our estimation of the Dechow-Dichev and modified Jones models. Specifically, we augment both regression (2) and the modified Jones model by adding a dummy variable, DCFO and an interactive variable DCFO\*CFO where DCFO receives the value 1 when CFO < 0 and 0

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standard error is based on a variance estimate of  $N \cdot P_i \cdot (1 - P_i) + [(1/4) \cdot N \cdot (P_{i-1} + P_{i+1}) \cdot (1 - P_{i-1} - P_{i+1})]$ , where N is the total number of observations and  $P_i$  is the probability that an observation will fall into interval  $i$ .

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, we estimate the following regression cross-sectionally within each two-digit SIC code industry:  $TACC_{i,t} = a_1 \cdot [1 / TA_{i,t-1}] + a_2 \cdot [(\Delta REV_{i,t} - \Delta TR_{i,t}) / TA_{i,t-1}] + a_3 \cdot [PPE_{i,t} / TA_{i,t-1}] + e_{i,t}$  where TACC is total accruals defined as the difference between income from continuing operations and net cash flow from operating activities, excluding extraordinary items and discontinued operations, TA is the beginning-of-the-year total assets,  $\Delta REV$  is the change in sales, PPE is the level of gross property, plant and equipment and  $\Delta TR$  is the change in trade receivables. For the years prior to 1988 when cash flow data are unavailable, we define total accruals as:  $\Delta(\text{current assets}) - \Delta(\text{current liabilities}) - \Delta(\text{cash}) + \Delta(\text{short-term debt}) - (\text{depreciation and amortization expense})$ , eliminating firm-year observations with "non-articulating" events (see Collins and Hribar 2002).

otherwise. Consistent with the results reported by Ball and Shivakumar (2006), the introduction of this proxy increases considerably the explanatory power of both accrual models.

Even with this improvement, the identification of earnings management through the various accrual models is very noisy. Patterns in earnings can be caused by a host of operational factors rather than earnings management. Further, certain accruals are devoid of any earnings management implications. For example abnormally high payments to suppliers or an abnormally high rate of collection from customers is captured by the modified Jones model as “abnormal” accruals yet these may be unrelated to earnings management. Despite the absence of a proven methodology to detect earnings management, the reliance on a number of techniques, all of which are widely used in the earnings management literature, should enhance the validity of our results.

### **Conservatism**

Another dimension of earnings quality is the extent of reporting conservatism. Conservatism may take the form of a more timely recognition of economic losses as compared with the recognition of economic gains, resulting in a systematic undervaluation of the book value of the firm’s equity relative to its economic value (see Watts 2003; Givoly et al. 2007). Note that while capital market and compensation considerations may lead public equity firms to manage earnings and thereby introduce greater estimation error (and bias) in accruals relative to private equity firms, such considerations are unlikely to result in a lower level of conservatism. In fact, the higher level of litigation risk faced by public equity firms and their management may induce a greater degree of conservatism through an earlier recognition of losses.<sup>19</sup>

From the demand side, the information asymmetry between shareholders and management creates a demand for a greater degree of conservatism in public equity firms relative to those with private equity (Ball and Shivakumar 2005). Our expectation therefore is that public equity firms will exhibit a higher degree of reporting conservatism than will private equity firms.

We use the speed in which earnings reflect bad news as compared with good news as a measure of conservatism. This measure has been employed by a number of studies (e.g., Basu 1997; Ball and Shivakumar 2005). In the context of our study, we hypothesize that because of a greater demand for earnings quality from their shareholders, public equity firms will recognize economic losses (bad news) in a timelier manner than will those with private equity. To capture the differential timeliness of the earnings response to bad versus good news, we use a measure

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Skinner (1994, 1997) and Kasznik and Lev (1995) explore management incentives to issue earnings warnings as a means of dampening litigation costs.

that captures the relative persistence of losses and gains. This measure is estimated as coefficient  $\alpha_3$  from the following piecewise linear regression:

$$\Delta NI_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 D\Delta NI_{i,t-1} + \alpha_2 \Delta NI_{i,t-1} + \alpha_3 D\Delta NI_{i,t-1} * \Delta NI_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{i,t-1} \quad (3)$$

where  $\Delta NI$  is the change in income (alternatively defined as including and excluding extraordinary and unusual items) from fiscal year  $t-1$  to  $t$ , scaled by the beginning book value of total assets and  $D\Delta NI$  is a dummy variable set equal to one if  $\Delta NI$  in the prior year is negative and zero otherwise.

Deferring the recognition of gains until their related cash flows are realized causes gains to be a “persistent” positive component of accounting income that tends not to reverse. An implication of this is that the coefficient  $\alpha_2$  is expected to equal zero. In contrast, the timely recognition of economic losses implies that they are recognized as transitory income decreases, which results in subsequent earnings reversals. This implies that  $\alpha_2 + \alpha_3 < 0$ . The hypothesis that economic losses are recognized in a more timely fashion than gains implies that  $\alpha_3 < 0$ .

Ball and Shivakumar (2005) develop an additional model to describe the differential timeliness of gain and loss recognition that relies on the correlation between accruals and contemporaneous cash flows as follows:

$$ACC_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 * DCFO_{i,t} + \alpha_2 * CFO_{i,t} + \alpha_3 * DCFO_{i,t} * CFO_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t-1} \quad (4)$$

where  $ACC$  is total accruals in year  $t$ , standardized by beginning-of-the-year total assets,  $CFO$  is cash from operations in year  $t$ , adjusted for extraordinary items and discontinued operations, standardized by beginning-of-the-year total assets,<sup>20</sup> and  $DCFO$  is a dummy variable set equal to one if  $CFO$  is negative and zero otherwise. The role of accruals in mitigating noise in operating cash flows would be reflected as  $\alpha_2 < 0$ . Conservatism, or the more timely recognition of losses, will lead to  $\alpha_3 > 0$ .

Similar to Ball and Shivakumar (2005), we hypothesize that public equity firms are more likely to recognize economic losses on a more timely basis than private equity firms. As in the estimation of regression (1), we account for the possible endogeneity in the choice to issue public or private equity using the Heckman (1979) two-stage procedure that involves the estimate of a PROBIT model and the determination of the inverse Mills ratio in the first stage and the inclusion of that ratio as a control variable in regressions (3) and (4).

<sup>20</sup> For the years prior to 1988, cash flow from operations is calculated as net income adjusted for depreciation and amortization as well as changes in working capital accounts (see footnote 18 for further detail).

Another form of reporting conservatism referred to as “unconditional conservatism” manifests itself in a systematic undervaluation of the firm’s net assets (e.g., by the early expensing of costs, the deferral of revenues or the creation of excessive loss provisions). Unconditional conservatism is observable by users of the financial statements and thus they can “undo” the bias in valuation that it creates. For these reasons, contracting-based demand for such a bias is unlikely (see Ball and Shivakumar 2005). Accordingly, we do not consider unconditional conservatism as an attribute demanded by investors in testing the demand hypothesis. However, since previous studies document a negative association between conditional and unconditional conservatism (e.g., Beaver and Ryan 2005; Givoly et al. 2007; Roychowdhury and Watts 2007), we control for unconditional conservatism in testing for differences in conditional conservatism between types of ownership.

To do this, we follow Penman and Zhang (2002) and capture unconditional conservatism by estimating the firm’s “hidden reserves.” These hidden reserves are created by the application of conservative accounting methods such as LIFO inventory or the expensing (rather than capitalizing) of investments in intangible assets such as R&D and advertising. The standardized sum of these reserves results in a C-score estimated as:

$$C\text{-score}_{i,t} = (INV_{i,t}^{\text{res}} + RD_{i,t}^{\text{res}} + ADV_{i,t}^{\text{res}}) / NOA_{i,t-1} \quad (5)$$

where  $INV^{\text{res}}$  is the value of the LIFO reserve,  $RD^{\text{res}}$  is the research and development reserve calculated as the estimated value of R&D assets that would have been reported on the balance sheet had R&D not been expensed,  $ADV^{\text{res}}$  is the advertising reserve estimated as the brand assets created by advertising expenditures and  $NOA$  is the value of net operating assets at the end of the prior year as previously defined. To determine the (hypothetical) R&D assets, we “capitalize” the annual R&D expenditures and amortize them using the sum-of-the-years’ digits method over a five-year period. We use a similar approach to estimate the advertising reserve, “capitalizing” advertising expenses and amortizing them using the sum-of-the-years’ digits method over a two-year period. The measure used in our tests is the Q-score which focuses on deviations from the industry-level reserves. It is calculated as the firm’s C-score minus the median C-score of the firm’s industry where industry is defined based on the two-digit SIC code of the firm.

Testing the differences in conservatism between private and public companies and the control for unconditional conservatism are accomplished through the introduction in regressions (4) and (5) of dummy and interactive dummy variables, as described in the results section.

## V. SAMPLE

To form our sample, we begin with the Compustat database (industrial, full coverage and research) and identify observations (firm-years) during the 26-year period from 1978-2003 that are likely to be private equity, public debt firms using the following criteria:

- (1) the firm's stock price at yearend is unavailable,
- (2) the firm has public debt (Compustat items #9 + #34) exceeding \$1 million,
- (3) the firm is a separate, domestic company (and not an ADR or a subsidiary of another public firm),
- (4) the firm has at least \$1 million in revenues and
- (5) the firm has the data required to test the hypotheses for at least two years.

We exclude firms in the financial industry (SIC codes between 6000 and 6999) and other regulated industries (SIC 4800-4900).

The resulting initial sample consists of 2,817 distinct firms and 12,261 firm-year observations. We then examined each firm in this sample to ensure that it had private equity in the identified time period. This resulted in the elimination of about 80% of the firms which actually had public equity but met criterion (1) due to missing price data. We further eliminated some firms because their organizational and ownership structures made it likely that their reporting policies and management incentives would differ from those of private equity, public debt firms in general. Specifically, we eliminated 21 firms structured as cooperatives or subsidiaries of cooperatives (302 firm-year observations), three firms structured as limited partnerships (27 firm-year observations) and two government-owned firms (16 firm-year observations). The final private equity sample consists of 531 distinct firms (2,519 firm-year observations).<sup>21</sup>

To construct a sample of public equity firms, we identified firms in the same time period that met criteria (2) through (5). By requiring that criterion (2) be met, we ensure that the public equity firms, similar to their private equity counterparts, have publicly-traded debt exceeding \$1 million. The presence of public debt in a given year was established based on one of the following indicators: (1) availability of S&P senior debt rating (Compustat item #280), (2) existence of debt debentures (#82) or (3) issuance of public debt according to the Mergent Fixed Income Securities database prior to the observation year with a maturity date beyond the

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<sup>21</sup> To identify private equity firms, we used data in the SEC filings on the EDGAR database (since 1993) and information on 10K Wizard (prior to 1993), bankruptcy information from BankruptcyData.com, and other historical information in the Hoover's database and several news resources including Factiva, ProQuest and LexisNexis.

observation year. Applying the above criteria resulted in a final sample of 3,954 distinct public equity firms (30,696 firm-year observations) with publicly-traded debt.

Public equity and private equity firms may have different attributes in addition to ownership type that are likely to affect earnings quality, such as firm size. To control for the effect of these attributes, we use a matched-pair sample in some of our analyses. This sample is constructed by matching each private equity firm with a public equity firm in the same industry and of a similar size. To form this matched sample, we ranked all firms in each sample (public equity and private equity) by their total assets at each yearend. We then partition the two samples into deciles to form ten firm-size portfolios. Each of the 2,519 firm-years in the private equity sample is then matched with an observation in the public equity firm sample drawn from the same size portfolio that (a) is the same year, (b) has the same 3-digit SIC code and (c) is closest in asset size to the private equity firm observation. The resulting matched pair sample consists of 538 matched pairs of private equity and public equity firms.<sup>22</sup>

## VI. RESULTS

### **Descriptive statistics of the private equity, public debt firm sample**

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics on the financial and other characteristics of the 531 firms (2,519 firm-years) in the private equity sample and the 3,954 firms (30,696 firm-years) in the public equity sample. Panel A shows the industry affiliation by type of owner. The private equity firms have a similar industry representation as the sample of public equity firms. Further, there is no particular industry clustering. However, as shown in panel B, there are differences in the financial characteristics of the two samples of firms. Private equity firms are considerably smaller, less profitable, more leveraged, have a lower sales growth rate, are younger and have a shorter operating cycle than the universe of publicly-traded companies in the U.S. However, in line with the notion that firms with a stronger financial position prefer, and are capable of, using the less costly and less restrictive public debt, note that private equity firms are generally financially sounder (with the exception of their sales growth) than those public equity firms that do not have public debt (firms shown in the rightmost column with private debt). These characteristics are consistent with the economic reasons that prompt private equity firms to issue

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<sup>22</sup> As explained in section VI, we also use an alternative matched-pair approach whereby we match each privately-owned firm with a publicly-owned firm in the same industry and year that has a similar probability of being private.

public debt: financing for an LBO or an MBO.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as panel C of table 1 indicates, private equity firms have a significantly higher concentration of S&P rated debt in the BB-D range as compared with public equity firms (53.6% and 22.4%, respectively).

[PLACE TABLE 1 HERE]

### **Accrual persistence**

The persistence of accruals is assessed through the estimation of regression (1). As noted earlier, we estimate this regression from the matched-pair sample (described in section V), controlling for the endogenous nature of the choice of ownership (public versus private) using the Heckman (1979) approach.<sup>24</sup>

Table 2 shows the coefficients from estimating an expanded version of regression (1) that includes a dummy variable for ownership type (private equity or public equity) and, in panel B, three control variables, leverage, growth and firm size. The high level of significance of virtually all of the cash flow and accrual coefficients as well as the relatively high explanatory of the regression suggest that it captures well the relation between cash flows and accruals in the current year, and the operating income in the following year, for both groups of firms.

Our focus is on the coefficients on the cash flow and accrual components of operating income as well as the difference in these coefficients between the private equity and public equity firms. If the accrual component of earnings causes earnings to be relatively less persistent than the cash flow component of earnings, then the coefficients on the accrual components of earnings will be smaller than those on the cash flow component of earnings. Using an F-test to test the equality of these coefficients (that is, testing whether  $q_1=q_2$  for public equity firms and whether  $(q_1+q_4) = (q_2+q_5)$  for private equity firms), the hypothesis that they are equal is rejected for both types of firms.

More important for our hypotheses, note that private equity firms exhibit a greater persistence of both cash flows and accruals than do public equity firms. The incremental coefficient of cash flows ( $q_4$ ) is positive and significant for both the regressions in panels A and B. The incremental coefficient of accruals ( $q_5$ ), while positive for both regressions, is statistically significant only in panel A. These results suggest that the quality of earnings of private equity firms, as captured by earnings persistence, is at least on par with, if not better than that of, public

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<sup>23</sup> Most of the private equity firms are owned by financial sponsors (e.g., Kohlberg, Kravis Roberts & Co.), management, or a combination of the two. These owner types suggest that the impetus for these firms to issue public debt was to affect a leveraged or management buyout.

<sup>24</sup> This procedure is described in section V. To obtain more efficient estimates for the cash flow and accrual variables, we also estimate regression (1) augmented by variables that are likely to relate to future profitability (i.e., leverage, sales growth and firm size).

equity firms. This is consistent with the “opportunistic behavior” hypothesis which suggests that financial reporting by public equity firms, because of capital market and managerial compensation incentives, is more susceptible to management intervention.

[PLACE TABLE 2 HERE]

### **Estimation error in the accrual process**

The estimation error in the accrual process is gauged by the variability of the accruals that remain unexplained by regression (2). We estimate this regression cross-sectionally within each industry separately for public equity and private equity firms. The separate estimation is needed because the basic relationship between accruals and cash flows may differ across the two types of firms.

The results from estimating this regression are provided in table 3 for the full sample and for the 23 industries that had a sufficient number (at least 20) of both public equity and private equity firms to perform the analysis. The table presents the mean values of the estimation errors; the median values (not reported) are not significantly different from the mean values.

Examining the first row of results, note that for the overall sample both measures of variability, the standard deviation of the residuals shown in columns [1] and [3] (2.57% and 4.05%, respectively) and the ratio of this standard deviation to the standard deviation of total current accruals shown in columns [2] and [4] (47.15% and 61.91%, respectively), are significantly higher for public equity firms as compared with private equity firms. Both of these differences are statistically significant as shown in columns [5] and [6]. Significant differences also exist at the industry level. As indicated by the industry differences shown in column [5], for the majority of industries (21 of 23), the standard deviation of the residuals from regression (2) (the unexplained accrual variability) is higher for the public equity firms than for those with private equity. Similar results were obtained for the ratio of the standard deviation of the regression residuals to the standard deviation of the total current accruals (the dependent variable) as shown in column [6]. Both differences are statistically significant in 13 of the industries and were further confirmed by a number of non-parametric tests.

These results indicate that public equity firms exhibit significantly greater accrual variability as well as relative accrual variability (that is a higher ratio of the standard deviation of residuals from regression (2) to that of total current accruals) than their privately-owned peers operating in the same industries.

We re-estimated regression (2) augmenting it with controls for size (alternatively defined as total assets or sales), growth in sales, leverage, profitability (RNOA), firm age, audit quality and operating cycle. The main results remain intact.<sup>25</sup>

Based on these results we conclude that the accrual estimation of public equity firms is of a lower quality than that of private equity firms. This is consistent with our earlier findings on the persistence of accruals, and lends further support to the “opportunistic behavior” hypothesis.

[PLACE TABLE 3 HERE]

### **Absence of earnings management**

As explained in Section IV, we identify the presence of earnings management in the two groups of firms using two tests. The first test is based on the distributional properties of earnings around two earnings thresholds: zero earnings and zero earnings growth. We refer to this test as the “threshold analysis.” The second test is based on the sign and magnitude of unexpected accruals of those observations that fall just above the two earnings thresholds.

The two compared groups of firms, those with private equity and those with public equity, may have different industry and operational characteristics that could potentially affect the earnings distribution around the thresholds and unduly influence our inferences. To control for these characteristics, we conduct the threshold analysis using a matched-pair approach. Specifically, we match each of the private equity firm-years with an observation in the public equity firm sample that occurs (a) in the same year, (b) has the same 3-digit SIC code and (c) is closest in the probability of being private to the private equity firm observation. The probability of being private is estimated from the PROBIT model described in Section V. The resulting sample consists of 1,193 pairs of matched firm-years.

The results of the threshold analysis using this matched-pair sample are presented in table 4. The actual and expected frequency of cases in the intervals “just above” and “just below” the two earnings thresholds are provided. The results pertain to earnings thresholds where earnings are defined as income from continuing operations<sup>26</sup> and to intervals just above and just below the

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<sup>25</sup>We re-estimated regression (2) with further control variables for the *expected* growth rate and a proxy for covenant violation. While we lose approximately half of the private equity observations due to missing data, the main results (not tabulated) remain intact.

<sup>26</sup> Although this definition most likely corresponds to the threshold that investors and management emphasize, we repeated the threshold analysis using both bottom-line net income (i.e., net income after extraordinary items and discontinued operations) and operating income. The findings were essentially the same.

thresholds that correspond to two bin-widths using the bin definition employed by DeGeorge et al. (1999).<sup>27</sup>

Panels A and B of table 4 indicate that for public equity firms, the actual frequency of cases just below (just above) the zero threshold of both earnings levels and earnings changes is lower (higher) than the expected frequency for that interval. The standardized difference between the expected and actual frequency, which under the null hypothesis would be distributed approximately Normal (0,1), is larger than 4.22 for the “just-above” regions. The same is true for private equity firms. This finding, which is comparable with previous findings (e.g., Burgstahler and Dichev 1997), is consistent with upward earnings management in cases that otherwise would have fallen slightly short of the earnings thresholds.

While there is a significant excess concentration of cases “just above” the threshold for public and private firms, the shift from “just below” to “just above” the threshold is more pronounced for the public equity firms. In fact, there is not a significant under-representation of cases in the interval “just below” either of the examined thresholds for private equity firms as indicated by the 0.59 and -0.78 standardized differences. As a result, the interpretation of the concentration of cases in the “just above” interval as a manifestation of earnings management is less obvious for privately owned companies.

[PLACE TABLE 4 HERE]

If earnings management takes the form of converting small losses to zero or small profits (or converting small earnings declines to the same earnings levels or small earnings increases), we would expect to observe abnormal positive accruals in the interval just above the threshold. Table 5 shows the extent of abnormal accruals in that interval.

To more precisely pinpoint earnings management cases, we examine the percentage of the positive unexpected accruals cases where these accruals “made the difference,” that is their magnitude was sufficiently positive so as to turn what would have otherwise been a loss into a small profit (or to offset what would otherwise be an earnings decrease). The table shows the proportion of cases in the “just above zero” interval for which the amount of unexpected positive accruals was larger than the amount by which reported income exceeded the threshold.

Two main findings emerge from this analysis. First, the percentage of cases with positive unexpected accruals in the interval just above the threshold is higher for the public equity firms than for the private equity firms. As shown on the first row of the results, 42.7% of the public

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<sup>27</sup> The determination of the width of the interval represents a tradeoff between fineness and precision and relies in part on the examination of the earnings distribution around the threshold. For further discussion of the “bin width” see Dichev and Skinner (2002, page 1108). The use of single-bin-width intervals leads to very similar results.

equity observations classified as being in the “just above zero” interval of the earnings distribution contain unexpected positive accruals while only 39.5% of the private equity firms in this interval had unexpected positive accruals. This difference of 3.2% is not statistically significant. However, the difference pertaining to the “zero earnings change” threshold shown in panel B of 15.9% is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The other finding that emerges from this analysis is that among the cases with positive unexpected accruals that fall in the “just above zero” range, the frequency of cases where unexpected accruals alone explain the excess of earnings over the threshold is larger for the public equity than for the private equity firms. To illustrate, for public equity observations, the magnitude of the unexpected accruals was sufficient to turn a loss into a profit for 28.4% of the cases and turn an earnings decrease into an earnings increase for 46.1% of the cases. The corresponding percentages for the private equity firms are lower, 25.3% and 36.1%, respectively. The difference between the two groups in the percentage of cases where abnormal positive accruals were large enough to enable the firm to meet the threshold of zero or positive earnings growth is significant at the 1% level.

Table 5 also presents the magnitude of unexpected accruals (standardized by total assets) in the regions just above the zero threshold in the last line of each panel. The mean and median values of the public equity firms’ unexpected accruals are more positive than those of the private equity firms. In panel A, the mean unexpected accruals (standardized by total assets) for the small profits region is -0.31% for public equity firms and -0.43% for private equity firms, an insignificant difference. In panel B, the mean unexpected accruals for the region of small earning increases is 0.63% for public equity firms but negative, -0.58%, for private equity firms, a statistically significant difference.

The overall tenor of the results in table 5 is consistent with more pronounced earnings management for public equity firms, in line with the “opportunistic behavior” hypothesis.<sup>28</sup>

[PLACE TABLE 5 HERE]

### **Conservatism**

As explained in section IV, we measure conservatism by the differential timeliness of loss versus gain recognition, referred to in the literature as “conditional conservatism.” We employ a measure proposed by Basu (1997) and used by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) as well as an accrual-based model proposed by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) to assess the extent of such conservatism in the two groups of firms. Following Ball and Shivakumar (2005), we account for possible

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<sup>28</sup> Repeating the analysis in table 5 using different bin-widths or employing the full sample produces similar results as regards the percentage of cases with positive accruals in the interval “just-above” the zero threshold.

endogeneity. Under conservative accounting, losses will be recognized more promptly and therefore will have lower persistence over time while gains will be gradually recognized in earnings resulting in an observed higher persistence of gains.

The results from estimating regressions (3) and (4) which assess the extent of “conditional conservatism” are presented in, respectively, tables 6 and 7. The coefficients of interest in regression (3) are those relating to the differential persistence of earnings declines versus earnings increases ( $a_3$  for public equity firms and  $a_3 + a_7$  for private equity firms) as well as the difference in this differential between these two groups of firms ( $a_7$ ). Two earnings measures, net income and income from continuing operations, are considered.

Two main results are evident from the results presented in table 6. First, and consistent with previous research, financial reporting in general is conservative. Earnings increases are significantly more persistent than earnings decreases for both groups of firms. Both  $a_3$  and  $a_3+a_7$  are negative and statistically significant for both earnings measures ( $a_3$  of -0.537 for both earnings measures and  $a_3+ a_7$  of -0.181 and -0.286 for the two earnings measures, respectively). Second, the extent of conservatism is greater for public equity firms as compared to that of private equity firms. The coefficient  $a_7$ , which indicates the excess persistence of earnings declines over earnings increases for public equity firms, is positive (0.357 and 0.251 for the two earnings measures, respectively) and statistically significant. Note that the coefficient of the inverse Mills variable ( $\lambda$ ) is significant for both types of firms, suggesting the presence of, and appropriateness of controlling for, endogeneity.

[PLACE TABLE 6 HERE]

The results from estimating regression (4) where accruals are regressed on contemporaneous cash flow variables are presented in table 7. The coefficient of CFO,  $b_2$ , is significantly negative, indicating the strong role that accruals play in mitigating the noise in operating cash flows. The coefficient of the interactive variable DCFO \* CFO,  $b_3$ , is significantly positive, suggesting that accruals are less negatively correlated with earnings in periods with “bad news” (as gauged by negative cash flows), suggesting a more timely incorporation of bad news as compared with good news in earnings. The coefficient of PRIVATE\*DCFO\*CFO,  $b_7$ , our variable of interest, is significantly negative at the 1% significance level, indicating a greater degree of conservative reporting by public equity firms as compared to private equity firms. These results confirm the findings regarding conditional conservatism reported in table 6.

Further, these results are consistent with those reported by Ball and Shivakumar (2005) for private and public companies in the U.K. Similar to that study, we interpret this finding as

indicating that public equity firms, because of the demand by investors and debt holders, report more conservatively than do private equity firms in the sense of a more pronounced earlier recognition of losses relative to gains. This finding of more conservative reporting by public equity firms is consistent with the “demand” hypothesis.

[PLACE TABLE 7 HERE]

As indicated earlier, prior research suggests that the extent of conditional conservatism may depend on the degree of unconditional conservatism. Since unconditional conservatism is also likely to be driven by certain firm characteristics (e.g., intensity of investment in intangible assets) that may vary between public and private firms, we control for unconditional conservatism in testing for differences in conditional conservatism between public and private firms. As discussed earlier, to do this we estimate for each firm the amount of its “hidden” reserves as captured by the Q-score devised by Penman and Zhang (2002) that gauges the difference in the ratio of the hidden reserves to total assets between the firm and its industry. We rank firms by their Q-score and define a dummy variable that partitions the firms based on whether they are above or below the median of the Q-score distribution. Through the use of interactive dummy variables, we obtain the equivalent of a separate estimation of regressions (3) and (4) for firms below and above the median Q-score value. Controlling for unconditional conservatism in this way, we continue to find a greater degree of conditional conservatism among public firms.

### **Can conservatism co-exist with earnings management?**

The findings discussed above suggest that public equity firms report more conservatively than their private equity counterparts, consistent with the finding of Ball and Shivakumar (2005) for firms in the U.K. At the same time, public equity firms have a greater propensity to manage income, in line with the results of firms in the U.S. banking industry reported by Beatty et al. (2002). The question arises as to whether these two findings are contradictory.

Empirically, the finding of greater conditional conservatism, that is, a more pronounced asymmetric response of earnings to bad versus good economic news, is not necessarily inconsistent with the presence of income-increasing earnings management. First, note that earnings management is situational, or episodic: It likely to occur in situations where unmanaged earnings would fail to meet a reporting objective considered by management to be important (such as meeting analysts’ earnings forecasts, loss avoidance or earnings decrease avoidance). If the company’s accounting is generally conservative, earnings management will only temporarily interrupt the observed reporting pattern and is therefore unlikely to render the reporting pattern to be aggressive overall. Second, consider the fact that earnings management typically involves

small magnitudes of earnings both because the positive accruals needed for such an activity are in short supply (see Barton and Simko 2002) and because large-scale earnings management is more easily detected and undone by investors. (This is why studies on earnings management consider likely earnings management cases to be those where earnings are “just above” the earnings threshold, such as zero earnings or zero earnings change.) Because of their small magnitude, the presence of instances of earnings management in the data is unlikely to obscure the presence, if any, of the much more prevalent phenomenon of reporting conservatism.

Note also that the presence of *unconditional* conservatism tends to increase the likelihood of earnings management because the reserves of accruals generated by this type of conservatism make it easier to engage in earnings management in case of the “need” to beat a particular threshold (see Penman and Zhang 2002).

We provide two tests, the results of which indicate that earnings management and conservative reporting can independently exist in the data. First, we test the extent of earnings management (see our analysis in table 4) for subsamples of firms that exhibit different levels of conditional conservatism. Specifically, we ranked firms by their degree of conditional conservatism (as captured by the coefficient  $\alpha_3$  in regression (3)) and partitioned them into quintiles. The results (not tabulated) show no difference in the presence of earnings management across the conservatism quintiles.

The second test involves a simulation analysis whereby we inject earnings-increasing components into earnings data generated by a process that conforms to conditional conservatism. Specifically, conservative behavior is introduced by modeling earnings as responding promptly and proportionally to contemporaneous negative economic shocks but not to contemporaneous positive economic shocks.<sup>29</sup> Earnings management is introduced to the simulation by adding a positive increment to unmanaged earnings whenever their value is just below zero, so as to avoid a loss. The results (not tabulated) show that the observed level of conservatism does not decrease when earnings management instances are present.

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<sup>29</sup> The simulation analysis uses the approach described in Appendix A of Givoly et al. (2007) for single-event periods. The degree of conservatism is assessed by the coefficient of the interactive dummy variable in the regression of return on earnings and an interactive variable of the return and a dummy variable that receives the value of 0 (1) when the return is not negative (negative) (see Basu 1997). The estimates are based on earnings data generated by 100,000 iterations of an earnings generating process whereby earnings respond immediately to negative, but not positive, economic shocks. The simulation is conducted twice, once where earnings management in the form of loss avoidance exists and a second time where this form of earnings management does not exist.

## VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of the paper illustrate that both management incentives and demand by investors for earnings quality are important factors that shape the financial reporting of firms. Public ownership of the firm's equity exposes management to investors' demand for reporting quality. This demand, which is expressed by investors in the form of the regulatory and legal environment in which the public equity firm operates, leads to more conservative reporting and hence higher reporting quality--the "demand" hypothesis. At the same time, the findings support the notion that management of firms whose equity is publicly traded has stronger incentives to manage earnings, thus reducing the reliability and usefulness of financial reports. That is, the findings are consistent with the "opportunistic behavior" hypothesis. While we use the most recent "technology" in measuring the various proxies for earnings quality, these proxies are still subject to potentially serious measurement errors. However, we are unaware of any systematic bias that these measurement errors introduce in our comparative analysis of the effect of ownership type on earnings quality. Overall, while public equity and private equity firms differ along various quality dimensions, neither type of firm "dominates" the other as having the highest quality of financial reports. Unless weights are assigned to different dimensions of earnings quality, one cannot conclude that the public listing of a firm's equity necessarily improves the quality of its financial reporting.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Private Equity and Public Equity Sample Firms<sup>a</sup>**

**Panel A: Industry Affiliation of Sample Firms by Ownership Type**

Industry (two-digit SIC codes)	Private Equity Firms		Public Equity Firms	
	No. of Obs.	% of Sample	No. of Obs.	% of Sample
Mining & Construction (10-14, 15-17)	18	3.4	318	8.0
Manufacturing I (20-29)	125	23.5	849	21.5
Manufacturing I (30-39)	164	30.9	1439	36.4
Transportation & Public Utilities(40-49)	21	4.0	158	4.0
Retail & Wholesale Trade (50-59)	117	22.0	517	13.1
Services (70-89)	84	15.8	628	15.9
Other	2	0.4	45	1.1
Total number of firms	531	100.0	3,954	100.0

**Panel B: Financial Characteristics of the Sample Firms by Ownership Type<sup>a</sup>**

		Private Equity Firms with Public Debt	Public Equity Firms with:	
			Public Debt	Private Debt
Number of Firms		531	3,954	10,673
Number of Firm-Year Observations		2,519	30,696	65,772
Total Assets (\$ millions)	Mean	637	1,990	128
	Median	337	483	39
Total Sales (\$ millions)	Mean	803	2,087	153
	Median	405	512	41
Leverage	Mean	67.2%	32.2%	25.5%
	Median	66.5%	29.5%	21.2%
Annual Sales Growth (%)	Mean	5.6%	9.9%	15.3%
	Median	4.6%	7.2%	8.5%
Return on Assets (%)	Mean	0.2%	3.2%	-3.7%
	Median	0.9%	4.3%	2.4%
Age of Firm (years)	Mean	8.9	19.9	10.2
	Median	4.0	18.0	7.0
Operating Cycle in Days	Mean	102	135	148
	Median	96	122	128
Audited by a "Big" Auditor		93.8%	93.0%	76.6%

<sup>a</sup> The distribution of each variable is truncated at the extreme  $\pm 1\%$  values.

**Legend:**

Leverage: Total debt/total assets.  
Sales Growth:  $[(Sales_t / Sales_{t-1}) - 1.0] * 100$ .  
Return on Assets:  $[Net\ income/total\ assets] * 100$ .  
Age: Number of years since first appearance on Compustat.  
Operating Cycle Days: Receivable collection period plus inventory turnover (in days).  
(Calculated as:  $[yearly\ average\ accounts\ receivables/(total\ revenues/360) + yearly\ average\ inventory/(cost\ of\ goods\ sold/360)]$ ).  
Audited by a "Big" Auditor: Percentage of firms audited by one of the big national auditing firms.

**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Private Equity and Public Equity Sample Firms (continued)**

**Panel C: Debt Rating of Private Equity and Public Equity Firms**

S&P Debt Rating	Private Equity Firms		Public Equity Firms	
	No. of Obs.	% of Sample	No. of Obs.	% of Sample
BBB or Better	78	3.1	7,403	24.1
BB	241	9.6	3,471	11.3
B	1,001	39.7	2,890	9.4
C – CCC	100	4.0	318	1.0
D and Selective Default	9	0.4	187	0.6
Not Rated	1,090	43.3	16,427	53.5
Total number of firm-years	2,519	100.0	30,696	100.0

**TABLE 2**  
**Persistence of Accruals**  
**Results from Estimating Regression (1):**  

$$OI_{t+1} = q_0 + q_1 * CF_t + q_2 * ACCR_t + q_3 * PRIVATE + q_4 * PRIVATE * CF_t + q_5 * PRIVATE * ACCR_t + \varepsilon_t^a$$

Variable	Panel A		Panel B	
	Coefficient	t-statistic	Coefficient	t-statistic
Intercept (q <sub>0</sub> )	0.031	3.64***	0.015	0.82
CF <sub>t</sub> (q <sub>1</sub> )	0.797	26.49***	0.783	24.67***
ACCR <sub>t</sub> (q <sub>2</sub> )	0.689	25.04***	0.638	18.14***
PRIVATE (q <sub>3</sub> )	0.002	0.13	0.029	1.67*
PRIVATE*CF <sub>t</sub> (q <sub>4</sub> )	0.122	2.86***	0.132	3.10***
PRIVATE*ACCR <sub>t</sub> (q <sub>5</sub> )	0.071	1.68*	0.061	1.48
LAMBDA	0.007	0.63	-0.005	-0.37
PRIVATE*LAMBDA	-0.015	-1.02	-0.023	-1.56
LEVERAGE <sub>t</sub>			-0.035	-2.05***
GROWTH <sub>t</sub>			0.084	2.93***
SIZE <sub>t</sub>			0.003	1.26
Adjusted R-square	65.47%		67.97%	
<u>Statistical tests:</u>				
F-test: q <sub>4</sub> =q <sub>5</sub>	4.14**		7.61***	
F-test: q <sub>1</sub> =q <sub>2</sub>	36.7***		36.1***	
F-test: (q <sub>1</sub> +q <sub>4</sub> )=(q <sub>2</sub> +q <sub>5</sub> )	77.1***		83.1***	
Number of observations	896		865	

<sup>a</sup> This regression is an expanded version of regression (1) that incorporates the ownership type (public or private equity). It is estimated on the 538 firm pairs in the matched-pair sample.

\*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level, \*\* significant at the 0.05 level, \* significant at the 0.10 level

**Legend:**

OI<sub>t+1</sub>: Operating income after depreciation deflated by NOA in year t  
ACCR<sub>t</sub>: Change in net operating assets from year t-1 to t, deflated by NOA in year t-1  
CF<sub>t</sub>: Operating profit after depreciation in year t divided by NOA in year t-1, minus ACCR<sub>t</sub>  
PRIVATE<sub>t</sub>: Dummy variable set to 1 for private equity firms and 0 for public equity firms  
LEVERAGE<sub>t</sub>: Total debt divided by total assets at the end of year t  
GROWTH<sub>t</sub>: Growth in total assets (item #6) at the end of year t  
NOA: Net operating assets computed as the book value of common and preferred equity plus long-term debt minus financial assets plus minority interest  
LAMBDA: Following Heckman (1979), a probit model is estimated with size (alternatively defined as total assets or sales), growth (in sales), leverage, profitability (operating income divided by net operating assets), the quick ratio, age, length of the operating cycle and audit quality (a dummy for the big national accounting firms) as predictors. Estimates of the probit model are used to compute an inverse Mills ratio for each firm. This ratio is then included in regression (1) as a control variable along with an interactive variable, PRIVATE\*LAMBDA, to allow its coefficient to vary between the two groups of firms.

**TABLE 3**  
**Mean Values of the Estimation Error of the Accrual Process**  
**Variability and Relative Variability of the Residuals from Regression (2):**  
 $TCA_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CFO_{t-1} + \beta_2 CFO_t + \beta_3 CFO_{t+1} + \beta_4 \Delta Rev_t + \beta_5 PPE_t + \beta_6 DCFO_t + \beta_7 DCFO_t * CFO_t + \varepsilon_t$

Industry (2-digit SIC)	Private Equity Firms			Public Equity Firms			Difference between Public Equity and Private Equity Firms	
	No. of Obs.	[1] Std Dev. of Residuals	[2] Ratio of S.D. <sup>a</sup>	No. of Obs.	[3] Std Dev. of Residuals	[4] Ratio of S.D. <sup>a</sup>	[5]=[3]-[1] Difference in Std Dev. of Residuals	[6]=[4]-[2] Difference in Ratio of S.D. <sup>a</sup>
All obs.	843	2.57%	47.15%	13,527	4.05%	61.91%	1.48%***	14.76%***
22	26	1.45	28.79	306	4.17	57.97	2.73***	29.18***
23	27	3.35	50.58	272	5.21	56.19	1.86	5.60
25	22	4.17	67.03	294	3.61	51.13	-0.56	-15.91
27	41	1.41	51.13	508	3.90	62.86	2.48***	11.72
28	61	2.60	58.53	1878	4.22	72.44	1.62***	13.91**
30	25	2.24	32.24	496	3.76	63.39	1.53	31.15***
33	24	2.87	48.45	855	3.79	64.36	0.92**	15.90
34	39	2.59	44.18	627	4.46	62.84	1.87***	18.67**
35	43	3.06	47.23	1716	5.12	67.38	2.05***	20.14***
36	27	2.97	44.65	1710	5.08	64.07	2.11**	19.43**
37	59	4.23	68.40	951	4.14	60.63	-0.09	-7.76
42	36	1.75	34.61	170	2.44	58.53	0.69	23.92***
47	23	0.70	44.58	46	3.07	51.76	2.37***	7.17
50	54	3.12	49.23	658	4.74	53.43	1.63***	4.20
51	27	2.07	23.23	392	4.00	50.17	1.93**	26.94***
53	20	3.21	45.58	383	3.61	53.43	0.40	7.85
54	60	1.76	50.08	312	2.35	61.70	0.59**	11.62*
58	65	3.11	54.51	286	3.48	70.62	0.37	16.11**
59	27	1.28	25.78	414	4.92	67.01	3.65***	41.22***
70	24	2.31	60.94	135	2.51	62.58	0.20	1.63
73	34	2.65	47.53	651	5.72	76.27	3.07***	28.74***
79	30	1.77	45.67	298	3.23	70.02	1.45**	24.35***
87	49	4.45	61.50	169	5.55	65.28	1.10	3.78

\*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level, \*\* significant at the 0.05 level; significance is determined using an F-test for equality of variances.

<sup>a</sup> Ratio of S.D. refers to the ratio of the standard deviation of the residuals from estimating regression (2) (in the previous column) divided by the standard deviation of total current accruals.

**Legend:**

$TCA_t$ : Total current accruals equals  $\Delta CA - \Delta CL - \Delta Cash + \Delta STDEBT$ ; CA is current assets, CL is current liabilities, STDEBT is the current portion of long-term debt, and changes are computed from year t-1 to year t.

$CFO_t$ : Cash flow from operations computed as income from continuing operations in year t minus total accruals in year t (total accruals in year t equal  $TCA_t$  - depreciation and amortization in year t).

$\Delta Rev_t$ : Change in revenues from year t-1 to year t.

$PPE_t$ : PPE (gross) in year t.

$DCFO_t$ : Dummy variable that is set to 1 if  $CFO_t < 0$  and to 0 otherwise.

**TABLE 4**  
**Frequency Distribution of Earnings around**  
**Zero-Earnings and Zero-Earnings-Growth Thresholds<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Panel A: Zero Earnings Threshold</b> (Number of observations is 1,193 matched pairs.)						
Interval <sup>b</sup>	Private Equity Firms			Public Equity Firms		
	Frequency of Observations		Standardized Difference <sup>d</sup>	Frequency of Observations		Standardized Difference
	Actual	Expected <sup>c</sup>		Actual	Expected	
“Just below zero”	211	202	0.59	101	160.5	-4.34
“Just above zero”	285	209.5	4.89	244	182	4.22
<b>Panel B: Zero Earnings Growth Threshold</b> (Number of observations is 792 matched pairs.)						
Interval	Private Equity Firms			Public Equity Firms		
	Frequency of Observations		Standardized Difference	Frequency of Observations		Standardized Difference
	Actual	Expected		Actual	Expected	
“Just below zero”	145	155	-0.78	117	140.5	-1.91
“Just above zero”	240	131.5	8.68	208	109	8.40

<sup>a</sup> In Panel A, the distribution of income from continuing operations in year t divided by total assets at the end of year t-1 (Income/ Total Assets) is examined to assess potential earnings management around this threshold. In Panel B, the distribution of the *change* in income from continuing operations from year t-1 to year t divided by total assets at the end of year t-2 ( $\Delta$ Income /Assets) is examined.

<sup>b</sup> Following DeGeorge et al. (1999), the bin width is calculated as  $2 \cdot 2(IQR)n^{-1/3}$ , where IQR is the sample inter-quartile range and n is the number of observations. The resulting bin width for the distribution of Income /Assets is 0.028 and 0.020 for the distribution of  $\Delta$ Income /Assets.

<sup>c</sup> The expected frequency in the interval is computed as the average of the number of observations in the two adjacent intervals.

<sup>d</sup> The standardized difference is the difference between the actual and expected frequency in the interval, divided by the standard deviation of the difference. The standard deviation of the difference is computed according to Burgstahler and Dichev (1997) as the square root of  $[N \cdot P_i \cdot (1 - P_i) + (1/4) \cdot N \cdot (P_{i-1} + P_{i+1}) \cdot (1 - P_{i-1} - P_{i+1})]$ , where N is the total number of observations and  $P_i$  is the probability that an observation will fall into interval i.

**TABLE 5**  
**Unexpected Accruals Behavior in the “Just Above Zero” Interval<sup>a</sup>**

	Percentage of Observations <sup>c</sup>		Difference in percentage of observations
	Private Equity Firms	Public Equity Firms	
<b>Panel A: Zero Earnings Threshold</b> (Number of observations is 1,108 matched pairs.) <sup>b</sup>			
Percentage of Cases with Positive Unexpected Accruals <sup>c</sup> (Out of all cases in the interval; no. of observations equals 225 and 261 for public equity and private equity firms, respectively)	39.5%	42.7%	3.2%
Percentage of Cases with Positive Unexpected Accruals Larger than the Excess over the Threshold <sup>d</sup> (Out of all cases in the interval)	25.3%	28.4%	3.2%
Mean (median) unexpected accruals standardized by total assets	-0.43% (-0.72%)	-0.31% (-0.37%)	0.11% (0.35%)
<b>Panel B: Zero Earnings Growth Threshold</b> (Number of observations is 740 matched pairs,)			
Percentage of Cases with Positive Unexpected Accruals <sup>c</sup> (Out of all cases in the interval; no. of observations equals 191 and 216 for public equity and private equity firms, respectively)	41.7%	57.6%	15.9% <sup>***</sup>
Percentage of Cases with Positive Unexpected Accruals Larger than the Excess over the Threshold <sup>d</sup> (Out of all cases in the interval)	36.1%	46.1%	10.0% <sup>***</sup>
Mean (median) unexpected accruals standardized by total assets	-0.58% (-0.78%)	0.63% (0.68%)	1.22% <sup>***</sup> (1.46% <sup>***</sup> )

\*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level, \*\* significant at the 0.05 level, \* significant at the 0.10 level  
Statistical significance is assessed using the t-test for differences in proportions.

<sup>a</sup> The interval just above (just below) zero is defined as the first positive (first negative) “bin” of the distribution. The bin widths are 0.028 and 0.020 for the distributions of Income/Total Assets and  $\Delta$ Income /Assets, respectively. Bin widths (BW) are determined by the formula:  $2*BW = 2*2(IQR)n^{-1/3}$ , where IQR is the sample inter-quartile range and n is the number of observations.

<sup>b</sup> In Panel A, the distribution of income from continuing operations in year t divided by total assets at the end of year t-1 (Income/ Total Assets) is examined to assess potential earnings management around this threshold. In Panel B, the distribution of the change in income from continuing operations in from year t-1 to year t divided by total assets at the end of year t-2 ( $\Delta$ Income /Assets) is examined.

<sup>c</sup> Unexpected accruals are derived from the cross-sectional modified Jones model (see section IV). To control for the asymmetric recognition of gains and losses, we augmented the modified Jones model with the following independent variables: cash flow from operations in year t ( $CF_t$ ), a dummy variable set to 1 if  $CF_t < 1$  and 0 otherwise ( $DCF_t$ ), and an interactive variable,  $CF_t \times DCF_t$  (Ball and Shivakumar (2006)).

<sup>d</sup> Cases where the threshold would not have been met in the absence of positive unexpected accruals.

**TABLE 6**  
**Differential Persistence of Profits versus Losses by Firm Ownership Type**  
**Summary Results for Expanded Version of Regression (3):**

$$\Delta NI_t = a_0 + a_1 * D\Delta NI_{t-1} + a_2 * \Delta NI_{t-1} + a_3 * D\Delta NI_{t-1} * \Delta NI_{t-1} + a_4 * PRIVATE + a_5 * PRIVATE * D\Delta NI_{t-1} + a_6 * PRIVATE * \Delta NI_{t-1} + a_7 * PRIVATE * D\Delta NI_{t-1} * \Delta NI_{t-1} + e_t$$

Variable <sup>a</sup> (Coefficient)	Predicted Sign under Conservatism and the “Demand” Hypothesis	Earnings Measure			
		Net Income		Income from Continuing Operations	
		Coefficient	t-statistic	Coefficient	t-statistic
Intercept (a <sub>0</sub> )	?	0.002	2.82***	0.002	2.72***
D $\Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>1</sub> )	?	-0.012	-8.99***	-0.010	-8.48***
$\Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>2</sub> )	0	-0.067	-5.20***	0.008	0.65
D $\Delta NI_{t-1} * \Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>3</sub> )	-	-0.537	-27.9***	-0.537	-27.7***
PRIVATE (a <sub>4</sub> )	?	-0.015	-2.91***	-0.015	-3.34***
PRIVATE * D $\Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>5</sub> )	?	-0.005	-1.45	0.000	-0.08
PRIVATE * $\Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>6</sub> )	-	-0.253	-7.04***	-0.194	-4.72***
PRIVATE * D $\Delta NI_{t-1} * \Delta NI_{t-1}$ (a <sub>7</sub> )	+	0.357	6.30***	0.251	3.89***
<b>a<sub>3</sub> + a<sub>7</sub><sup>b</sup></b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-0.181</b>	<b>4.93**</b>	<b>-0.286</b>	<b>9.98***</b>
LAMBDA (a <sub>8</sub> )		0.067	18.12***	0.055	17.59***
PRIVATE * LAMBDA (a <sub>9</sub> )		-0.055	-13.74***	-0.045	-12.88***
Adjusted R-square		10.44%		7.75%	
Number of observations		21,501		21,441	

\*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level, \*\* significant at the 0.05 level, \* significant at the 0.10 level

<sup>a</sup>Each variable is truncated at the extreme +/-1% values of its distribution.

<sup>b</sup>The F-test is used to test the hypothesis that  $a_3 + a_7 = 0$ .

**Legend:**

$\Delta NI_t$ : Change in the earnings measure from year t-1 to year t, divided by total assets at the end of year t-1

D $\Delta NI_t$ : Dummy variable which is set to 1 if  $\Delta NI_{t-1} < 0$  and 0 otherwise

PRIVATE: Dummy variable that is set to 1 for private equity firms and 0 for public equity firms

LAMBDA: See the description provided in table 2

**TABLE 7**  
**Conservatism Measured as the Relative Timeliness of Recognizing Losses versus Gains**  
**Summary Results for the Expanded Version of Regression (4):**

$$ACC_t = b_0 + b_1 * DCFO_t + b_2 * CFO_t + b_3 * DCFO_t * CFO_t + b_4 * PRIVATE + b_5 * PRIVATE * DCFO_t + b_6 * PRIVATE * CFO_t + b_7 * PRIVATE * DCFO_t * CFO_t + e_t$$

Variable <sup>a</sup> (Coefficient)	Predicted Sign	Coefficient	t-statistic
Intercept (b <sub>0</sub> )	?	0.002	1.82 <sup>*</sup>
DCFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>1</sub> )	?	0.008	3.90 <sup>***</sup>
CFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>2</sub> )	-	-0.442	-58.12 <sup>***</sup>
DCFO <sub>t</sub> *CFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>3</sub> )	+	0.103	3.63 <sup>***</sup>
PRIVATE (b <sub>4</sub> )	?	-0.071	-15.73 <sup>***</sup>
PRIVATE*DCFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>5</sub> )	?	-0.018	-2.41 <sup>**</sup>
PRIVATE*CFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>6</sub> )	?	-0.068	-2.28 <sup>**</sup>
PRIVATE*DCFO <sub>t</sub> *CFO <sub>t</sub> (b <sub>7</sub> )	-	-0.340	-2.83 <sup>***</sup>
<b>a<sub>3</sub>+ a<sub>7</sub><sup>b</sup></b>	<b>?</b>	<b>-0.237</b>	<b>4.12<sup>**</sup></b>
LAMBDA (b <sub>8</sub> )	?	0.127	41.67 <sup>***</sup>
PRIVATE*LAMBDA (b <sub>9</sub> )	?	-0.096	-23.21 <sup>***</sup>
Adjusted R-square		26.12%	
Number of observations		21,405	

\*\*\* significant at the 0.01 level, \*\* significant at the 0.05 level, \* significant at the 0.10 level

<sup>a</sup>Each variable in the table is truncated at the extreme +/-1% values of its distribution.

<sup>b</sup>The F-test is used to test the hypothesis that a<sub>3</sub>+ a<sub>7</sub> = 0.

**Legend:**

- ACC<sub>t</sub>: Total accruals divided by total assets at end of year t-1  
 (For years 1988-2003, total accruals equal [income before extraordinary items – net cash flow from operating activities+ extraordinary items and discontinued operations] divided by total assets at end of year t-1. For years prior to 1988: total accruals equal [change in current assets in year t – change in current liabilities in year t – change in cash and cash equivalents in year t + change in current maturities of long-term debt and other short-term debt included in current liabilities in year t – depreciation and amortization expense in year t]. Firm-year observations with the following events were eliminated: (1) a merger or acquisition, (2) discontinued operations where the absolute value of the dollar impact exceeded \$10,000; (3) a gain or loss on foreign currency translations where the absolute value of the dollar impact exceeded \$10,000. (See Collins and Hribar (2002) for a discussion of this approach.)
- CFO<sub>t</sub>: Cash flow from operations divided by total assets at the end of year t-1  
 (For years 1988-2003, net cash flow from operating activities was used. For years prior to 1988, net cash flow from operating activities was estimated as: [funds from operations – change in current assets in year t + change in cash and cash equivalent in year t + change in current liabilities in year t – change in current maturities of long-term debt and other short-term debt included in current liabilities in year t]. All variables are divided by total assets at end of year t-1.) (See Xie (2001) for a discussion of this approach.)
- DCFO<sub>t</sub>: Dummy variable set to 1 if CFO<sub>t</sub> < 0 and 0 otherwise
- PRIVATE: Dummy variable set to 1 for private equity firms and 0 for public equity firms
- LAMBDA: See the description provided in table 2.