Studies in public finance, and textbooks in particular, have been written almost exclusively by economists and for students of economics. Perhaps, that is understandable since they are about finance, but surely it is not presumptuous if a political scientist enters a modest complaint that the public aspect has, until recently, been forgotten or subordinated to the financial. Whether presumptuous or not, I do wish to register a "complaint" about public finance texts because I not only use them in my teaching but hope to influence future writers. I should very much like to see these texts somewhat reorganized and reoriented so as to reflect not less of the economic side of public expenditures and revenues, but include more and more sophisticated political analysis.

With the welcome exceptions of Buchanan's and, now, Herber's notable texts, (1) nearly all such books deal almost exclusively with the economic impacts of public finance. To be sure, there has always been a chapter or two on the growth of public expenditures and perhaps some descriptive commentary -- usually unrewarding -- on how public policy is arrived at, in the United States. The writers seem not in the least acquainted with more sophisticated versions of political theory, nor and this may be understandable -- with the exciting contributions that have been made during the past decade by such economists as Buchanan, Tullock, Downs, McKean, Davis, Arrow, Musgrave, Lindblom, and Olson. Since current research and theory usually take a decade or more to find their way into textbooks we should be gratified that some of these new ideas are already found in the Buchanan and Herber texts.

But, even in these two volumes one finds the political treatment somewhat disappointing. First, public finance writers are still inclined to confuse normative and empirical theories with respect to explaining why a government adopts the financial policies it does. We are generally presented with a set of logical economic reasons why some people
(especially economists) are apt to think that particular activities ought to be made public. I have in mind the usual statements about externalities, decreasing costs, imperfect markets, uniqueness of particular resources, and indivisibility. Such reasons do not necessarily account for the actions of citizens nor governments in making their collective choices. They do offer excellent rationales for government assuming certain activities, but the fact that something makes economic sense does not necessarily mean it will be done. Unless one includes considerations of political decision rules, the distribution of power, and various structural facts about economies and cultural preferences, he cannot adequately explain why the budgets of, say, the democracies of the world are as they are: why are similar allocations made with respect to some activities and not with respect to others? We are beginning to learn something about these collective outcomes from the work of Peacock, Abramovitz, Dye, Davis, Wildavsky, and others. In short, how public choices are made and actual patterns of economic policy evolve are neither well described nor adequately accounted for in public finance texts.

Another disappointment relates to discussions on the allocation of costs and the distribution of benefits or "welfare." Again, one finds analyses of the incidences of most taxes and to a lesser extent expected beneficiaries of various expenditures, but the treatment is usually cast in purely theoretical terms. Equally important, one discovers that no attempt is made to explain why different systems (both democratic and non-democratic) adopt specific revenue and expenditure programs. Why is it that different countries use quite different ratios of direct and indirect taxes, different degrees of progression, different means of collection and administration, different expenditure controls? Since these are public choices we ought to have an explanation; such an explanation ought to include political variables. Certainly economic models of choice may and must be employed but let us explain the behavior of the politician, a person and role that seldom appears in public finance texts.

Public finance texts may also be accused of parochialism for the United States is almost the sole example. In fact, the publishers really should add "in the United States" to the titles of such books as Groves' Financing Government. A good dose of data about other countries ought to be included to cure American students of their own ethnocentrism. Understanding, in any case, is usually abetted by comparative budgetary materials and while I fully realize the difficulties of finding strictly comparable figures, it is now possible to find enough to illustrate variations and similarities among many nations of the world.