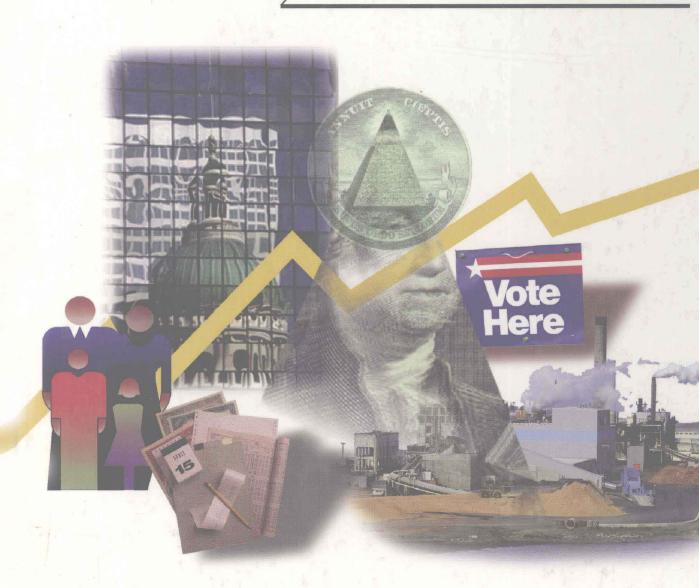
PUBLIC FINANCE

and the American Economy



NEIL BRUCE



PUBLIC FINANCE and the American Economy

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Preface

Writing a textbook on American public finance at this time has been like reporting a horse race while it is still in progress. When I began, the track was crowded with entries, some of which—like Health Care Reform—hardly got out of the starting gate. Others, like Flat Tax, appeared as contenders in the heat of the presidential race but faded in the stretch. One two-year-old—Budget Impasse—practically stopped the race. Unlike a horse race, however, the contest among public policies has no finish line. We can be sure that none of the challengers named here is out of the race for good; the same issues that grabbed the headlines during the past few years will continue to absorb the nation's attention for years to come.

One of the main reasons I wrote this book is my conviction that a good understanding of public finance is essential for interpreting and understanding the profusion of fiscal events and proposals that occupy national attention, from cutting capital gains taxes to privatizing social security. These policies and proposals can affect our lives in important ways, yet because they frequently are poorly understood—even by knowledgeable people—they are easy to politicize and difficult to amend. To corroborate this, one need only look at the often acrimonious budget debates. Although current issues and policy debates motivate and illustrate the substance of public finance in this book, I also relate the issues and debates to the enduring questions of public finance: What is the appropriate role of government in a market economy? How do government programs affect the economy? How should the programs be financed? Who will benefit, and who will pay? These fundamentals provide the necessary background for putting the diverse array of policies in the right perspective.

Another reason for this textbook is my view that public finance is an excellent subject for students seeking to apply economic theory and methods to interesting real-world problems. Many of my own students, initially skep-

tical toward economic theory because they thought it too abstract and divorced from real-world issues, became enthusiastic about economics by taking public finance because it showed them how to think about and understand important issues—such as using pollution permits to reduce the cost of environmental protection and charging tolls to reduce highway congestion. Students learn economics best by applying it to practical issues, whether balancing the budget or reforming welfare. I wrote this book with the need to engage and motivate students utmost in mind.

The text is directed at seniors or juniors who have taken a course in intermediate microeconomics, or at least a solid principles course using analytic tools such as the indifference curve diagram. Nonetheless, I have aimed to make the book accessible to students with more limited backgrounds who are willing to do some preparation. Specifically, the text emphasizes intuitive and diagrammatic explanations wherever possible, and it avoids mathematical expressions unless necessary. Chapter appendixes cover the more difficult analytic material, and a main appendix reviews the core concepts of microeconomic theory used throughout the book.

In writing this book, I have also wanted to share with readers my interests in and enthusiasm for public finance. At a time when popular views about government seem divided between fanciful idealism and relentless cynicism, a subject that so clearly identifies the objectives good government can accomplish while recognizing the harm bad government can do is a much-needed corrective. My objective has been to present the subject in a manner that is comprehensive, balanced, up-to-date, and as interesting as possible. The main governmental spending and tax programs are described in what I hope is the optimal amount of detail: enough for interested readers to find what they need but not so much that they get lost in a sea of numbers. Description, however, has not been my main goal. Throughout the book, the economic ideas and concepts underlying the different programs are discussed, and the effects of the programs on the economy are analyzed.

I should mention also that I have aimed to write an honest book that conveys what economists know about the impact of government policies on the economy but does not gloss over the many defects and uncertainties in this knowledge. While I have not shied away from discussing unresolved differences on empirical and conceptual matters, I have avoided debates and controversies that are purely doctrinal or ideological. My guiding principle has been to present economics as a method of understanding the economic functions of government and the ways they can best be achieved.

Content and Organization

Although the book is organized traditionally, with the chapters divided equally between spending programs and revenue policies, it features many new and useful approaches to public finance and some important differences in emphasis from other textbooks. Part I examines the economic roles that government plays in a market economy. Chapter 1 opens with a comprehen-

sive statistical overview of government and highlights the budget process; uncontrollable government spending; and "hidden" government spending, such as tax expenditures, loan guarantees, and regulations. In Chapter 2, welfare economics provides a coherent framework for understanding the choice between markets and government. The chapter explains economic efficiency in clear intuitive terms and illustrates the concept of market failure with several examples, including the problem of "orphan drugs."

Part II focuses on government programs that reallocate the use of the economy's resouces. Chapter 3 presents an engaging example illustrating efficient outputs of public goods and introduces some novel aspects of public good theory, such as the free-rider problem as a type of prisoner's dilemma problem, and the application of public good theory to policies regarding knowledge capital and technology. Recent developments in network externalities, as well as conventional forms of externalities, are covered in Chapter 4. An especially useful feature of this chapter is an extensive and up-to-date discussion of environmental policy alternatives. Given the importance of the "new federalism," an entire chapter—Chapter 5—is dedicated to state and local spending. This chapter develops fiscal federalism as a framework for understanding the issues raised by the intense current interest in devolving federal programs to the states.

In Part III, public choice and benefit-cost analysis reveal different sides of the government decision-making process. A structured treatment of voting theory and of the incentives facing bureaucrats—topics of mounting importance in public finance—is found in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 offers an emphasis on benefit-cost analysis that is different from what is usually found in such chapters. Rather than stressing the mechanics of discounting, the chapter focuses on the methods of measuring benefits and costs, especially non-market goods. It includes a description of the property-value and travel-cost methods, as well as an evaluation of the controversial contingent valuation method.

The three chapters in Part IV describe the latest advances in the spending programs for welfare, social security, health, and education, which now constitute the bulk of government spending. The main poverty programs are described in Chapter 8, which also reports the latest developments in the welfare debate, including the far-reaching reforms of 1996. The analysis of the social security program in Chapter 9 includes a discussion of how the program redistributes income, and also evaluates recent proposals for reform, such as privatizing the program or investing the trust fund in stocks. This chapter also covers unemployment compensation programs. Chapter 10, on government programs that enhance human resources, gives equal weight to education and health care.

The remaining chapters cover the tax system and tax policy issues. The three chapters in Part V provide a solid foundation for understanding the tax system. Chapter 11 introduces students to the effects of taxes on the allocation of resources, using an excise tax as a model. Chapter 12 features an unusually detailed explanation of tax incidence. In addition to the standard analysis of forward and backward shifting, the chapter contains a step-by-

step calculation of the incidence of an excise tax across income groups and discusses new developments, such as lifetime incidence and generational accounting. Methods of evaluating tax policy, including an intuitive diagrammatic explanation of optimal tax theory, are highlighted in Chapter 13. The chapter stresses the criteria of equity and administrative costs, as well as economic efficiency, for determining desirable tax policies.

Part VI provides a comprehensive and up-to-date examination of the federal income tax system and its impact on household behavior. Chapter 14 describes the structure of personal income and payroll taxes using the Haig-Simons concept to identify the main selective features. The effects of these taxes on household behavior, including recent empirical results, are presented in Chapter 15, which also discusses the politically sensitive topic of tax expenditures, like the mortgage interest deduction. Chapter 16 covers business income taxes more thoroughly than usual by emphasizing the principles that define business income, as well as the details of the corporate income tax system.

The chapters in Part VII explore topics that often receive too little attention. Taxes on consumption and wealth, including federal excise and estate taxes, state retail sales taxes, and local property taxes, receive special attention in Chapter 17. The chapter explains the technical and policy issues associated with taxing consumption under a VAT and a personal consumption tax, such as the recently proposed "USA tax." Chapter 18 is unique to this book. It provides a full treatment of multijurisdictional tax issues, including state and local taxes, tax exporting and tax competition, formula apportionment and unitary taxation, and the taxation of multinational exterprises. Varying views on the dangers of deficit finance are explained in Chapter 19. This chapter highlights the latest developments in this area, including Ricardian equivalence, alternative ways of measuring the deficit, optimal deficit policy, the burden of government debt, and the merits of a balanced budget amendment.

Some Special Features

In addition to presenting the most important and up-to-date developments in public finance, I have tried to preserve the traditional core of the subject and to place recent fiscal events in a historical perspective where appropriate. Several features, I believe, distinguish this book. Some of the most notable are described below.

Increased
Attention to
Issues of
Fairness and
Distribution

Although economists are famous for stressing efficiency, in polls people express great concern about issues of fairness in public policy. In the policy sections of this book, I make an effort to pay more attention to equity criteria than is common in public finance textbooks. Some examples are the identification of equity principles, the use of the social welfare function and distri-

butional weights, the trade-off between efficiency and equity, and the interplay of equity and efficiency in setting desirable tax rates on different goods.

Fuller Treatment of State and Local Public Finance Issues Given the growing importance of the "new federalism," I was determined from the outset to write a textbook that gives more weight to the fascinating public finance issues facing state and local governments. There are two full chapters on these issues—one on spending and another on taxes—presented in the appropriate parts of the book. Readers can find topics on state and local governments in other chapters as well.

Extensive Use of Examples

The relative price of one picture is a thousand words, so I did my best to gather as many interesting and illuminating examples as I could find. Most chapters feature two boxes drawn from newspapers, journals, current research, or the World Wide Web that illustrate or offer an interesting perspective on the topics covered in the chapter. In the narrative itself, I use numerous other examples to clarify abstruse ideas and consolidate students' understanding of the material.

Summary of Recent Empirical Research

Throughout the book, I have attempted to communicate what economists know about how government programs and policies affect the economy. To this end, I have drawn on the latest empirical results, including, for example, the effects of welfare programs on household behavior, the influence of the "marriage tax" on marital decisions, and the impact of IRAs on saving.

Emphasis on Practical Applications

Although the book contains a fair amount of intermediate microeconomic theory, including the labor-leisure model and the intertemporal choice model, I have avoided theory for theory's sake. Rather, I have stressed the practical application of microeconomic theory as a tool for understanding the impacts of government policy, such as the effect of a tax credit on the labor supply and the effect of a deficit on household saving.

Instructional and Learning Aids

In addition to the features already mentioned, such as the boxes on illustrative topics, the book offers several other instructional and learning aids.

- Captioned diagrams. The text contains more than 100 diagrams and figures accompanied by descriptive captions that enhance the text discussion and help students review the material.
- Appendix on microeconomics. As mentioned, the book is directed at students who have already taken a course in intermediate microeco-

- nomics. To help students who lack this background or want to refresh their memories, I have included an appendix at the end of the book that reviews some of the most important elements of microeconomic theory.
- Conclusions and summaries. Following the text of each chapter, a concise conclusion recaps and ties together the chapter's main points and draws out larger ideas. A bulleted summary—a handy study aid for students—further reviews the essential chapter contents.
- **Problems.** Each chapter is followed by several carefully chosen Questions for Discussion and Review, designed to probe students' comprehension of the chapter material. These include factual questions, computational problems, and conceptual questions suitable for classroom discussion.
- Key terms and glossary. Important terms and expressions are introduced in boldface and are clearly explained or defined. For reference, the key terms and their definitions are collected in a Glossary at the end of the book.
- Selected and consolidated references. Each chapter concludes with a selection of references, with descriptions that are useful for readers who want to delve further into the topics presented. Numerous Internet sources are included. At the end of the text, a Consolidated References section provides detailed publishing information for these references.

Supplements

An Instructor's Manual is available to adopters of the text. It contains chapter summaries, lecture suggestions, answers to the problems presented in the text, and questions and problems suitable for tests and examinations. The Instructor's Manual draws on my experience in teaching public finance to undergraduate students over the past twenty years.

Acknowledgments

As an economist, I find it a special irony to acknowledge the enormous help given me by others. In a discipline that expounds theories of self-interested individuals, it is heartening to recognize the unselfish acts of others. I have been particularly fortunate in this regard, having received valuable contributions from several editors, numerous reviewers, generous colleagues, helpful students, and concerned relatives.

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Finally, I must make the obligatory disclaimer. I, and not the aforementioned individuals, am to blame for any remaining errors or shortcomings.

N.B.



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