Few books hold as iconic a place in a field of learning as does Implementation by Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, first published in 1973 and since then a mainstay among specialists on the subject of policy implementation. The book was a best-seller in academic terms and was published again through two more editions. The third edition, published in 1984, remains in print to this day. The core initial study contained the main empirical and theoretical contributions and attracted widespread attention. Indeed, the cover of the paperback third edition contains blurbs from the New York Times, National Review, New Republic, and Virginia Quarterly Review.

Beyond such general publications, most serious research studies of policy implementation in the subsequent decades have continued to cite the study—often in general terms, sometimes as a sort of touchstone, much as Woodrow Wilson’s 1887 essay is cited by scholars in public administration as the publication that symbolically launched a self-aware field of inquiry. And, as with Wilson’s essay, attributing such a role to Pressman and Wildavsky’s contribution is somewhat misleading. For though it is true that these two political scientists claimed that they were creating a new field of study by focusing on policy implementation—“no one else has apparently tried to distinguish policy from implementation” (xxiii n. 4)—implementation in recent years has been much discussed but rarely studied. The book effectively ignored virtually the entire field of public administration and the many studies there that hold relevance for those interested in investigating and analyzing policy implementation.

The EDA in Oakland: A Case That Catalyzed a Field


Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky’s book took hold of people’s attention and imagination not only because of the authors’ (dubious) claims of virtually complete originality, but also because it told a gripping story that was then fitted ex post facto with an absorbing theoretical explanation. The volume tells the case study tale of a project funded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) in Oakland, California, that was intended to create permanent jobs for minorities through the construction of a hangar and terminal and the subsequent leasing of the terminal to a for-profit company that would expand and hire minority workers. Financial resources had been appropriated, local actors seemed favorably disposed, and conflict appeared minimal—and yet after several years, almost nothing had happened on the ground. Pressman and Wildavsky’s analysis of the implementation process leading to such disappointing results concluded that the causes of failure “were of a prosaic and everyday character. Agreements had to be maintained after they were reached. Numerous approvals and clearances had to be obtained from a variety of participants” (xx). The authors argue that implementation is an exceedingly difficult challenge, and they encourage readers to expect frequent problems, perhaps occasionally punctuated by rare successes. Why? In their efforts to generalize from the case, they diagnose the principal difficulty as what they refer to as “the complexity of joint action” (see 87–124). Most implementation settings, Pressman and Wildavsky suggest, are marked by a multiplicity of participants,
including organizational participants, and perspectives. Here I leave aside the fact that some analysts have since challenged the interpretation of the case offered by these authors (see, e.g., Stoker 1991, 75–81). The key to getting something done, the authors argue, is to keep it simple (e.g., 147)—fewer steps, fewer actors, fewer decision points—but unfortunately, so they indicate, pluralistic policy processes such as implementation place a premium on adding participants and decisions as part of what it takes to build and maintain sufficient support in a diffuse and multi-actor setting. In other words, even Pressman and Wildavsky regard their prescription for success—simplicity—as impractical and usually unattainable. We seem to be largely stuck with the need to recognize the long odds of implementation success, at least in governance systems such as those operating in the United States. It is no surprise that this volume, therefore, became a favorite among neoconservatives, who sought to caution policy makers and others against ambitious governmental agendas and grand hopes of social betterment. It is likely, as well, that the book remains influential, despite having been superseded and critiqued by a great deal of the subsequent implementation research that it helped to generate, because of its undeniably broad perspective and challenging general message.

The overall argument is rendered more vivid and gripping by two additional features of the study. First, as a metaphor for the implementation challenge as they conceptualize it, the authors sprinkle a set of Rube Goldberg cartoons throughout the book and on its front cover. These classic depictions of worthy and useful ends being executed through impossibly complex mechanical devices that are highly likely to fail serve as a visualization of the primary lesson taught by Pressman and Wildavsky: our implementation mechanisms typically are designed as cumbersome and “complex chains of reciprocal interaction” (xxv), the success of which requires an implausibly large leap of faith. If readers remember nothing else from this book, they are likely to recall the amusing cartoons, which convey a larger notion about why we should expect failure as the regular outcome.

Second, the authors model in a mathematical sense their core lesson as well as their metaphor. They do so by characterizing the implementation process as encountering a long succession of decision points (see esp. 102–110). They estimate that in the EDA in Oakland case that they dissect, approximately 30 separate decision points can be identified, and many of these required multiple agreements to be reached, given that multiple participants were involved in many of the decisions. By their estimate, 70 distinct agreements had to be conjured for completion of the program effort in Oakland. Their method of modeling the central meaning of this empirical challenge seems to virtually "prove" that the chances of implementation success in such cases are vanishingly tiny. And yet, as it happens, their approach is seriously flawed in a number of respects.

It is worth understanding their formal analysis, as it reveals the working assumptions undergirding this influential study of policy implementation. True to their notion that implementation is best seen as a complex, serial succession of decision points with many agreements necessary for good things to happen, they undertake a set of probabilistic calculations to show how tough it almost certainly is to get anything done. Because they see "success" in terms of complete agreement at all decision points; because they see the decision points as linked in series rather than, say, in parallel; and because they see "clearance" in all of these agreements as unaffected by what has happened as a result of preceding agreements or decisions, their model resembles a high hurdle race—any lack of agreement at any point spells failure. Although Pressman and Wildavsky do not display it and simply show the results of their calculations using this model, we can formalize their treatment of such implementation settings.

The appropriate shorthand mathematical expression for the overall probability of success in such a situation, as conceptualized by the authors, is

$$P_{overall} = p^n$$

where $P_{overall}$ is the overall probability of implementation success, $p$ is the probability of agreement at each clearance point, and $n$ is the number of agreements needed for the project or program to be implemented. (For purposes of exposition, but in a fashion not meant to be taken literally, Pressman and Wildavsky assume equal probabilities at all agreement points across all decisions. This assumption is represented in the foregoing expression, although altering it would not appreciably change the nature of their argument.3)

Given that $n = 70$ for the Oakland case, by their reckoning, it is obvious that even high probabilities of clearance at individual points produce a very low "probability of success after 70 clearances." As they note, "we shall assume the best. We shall deliberately err on the side of assuming more agreement and good will than might actually have been the case. We shall load the dice in favor of keeping the program going" (107). They indicate that with a probability of success of 80 percent at each clearance point, the overall probability of implementation success is a minuscule 0.000000125, and that the overall probability drops below 50 percent after a mere four clearance points. Even with a probability per clearance point of 95 percent, the overall probability after 70 such points is
Pressman and Wildavsky add to this clearance point calculus additional nuances—including that new programs often embrace multiple goals rather than merely one, and also that delay, rather than a simple go or no-go decision, is a prominent feature of implementation settings. “Delay . . . is a function of the number of decision points, the number of participants at each point, and the intensity of their preferences” (118).

The analysis offered by Pressman and Wildavsky appears to be devastating to the agenda of those actively seeking to address public problems, especially complicated problems involving numerous stakeholders, through governmental policy. Thus, we encounter what has been dubbed the “Pressman-Wildavsky paradox” by one researcher (Bowen 1982; see also Alexander 1989): Implementation seems to demonstrate that failure is essentially inevitable, but we are surrounded by numerous striking examples of effective governmental action.

One might argue, along with Kettl (1993), that Pressman and Wildavsky as well as many other students of implementation have oversampled from the complex end of the distribution of policy implementation cases, and that most empirical instances are much more straightforward—with many fewer decisions and clearance challenges than are modeled in the EDA case in Oakland. This argument is weakened, however, by studies presenting more systematic evidence showing, indeed, that most new or substantially revised federal programs involve multiple organizations, often in highly interdependent fashions (Hall and O’Toole 2000, 2004).

Alternative analyses, however, particularly that offered by Bowen (1982), demonstrate some of the serious limitations of the Pressman and Wildavsky approach. Persistence—going back repeatedly to seek clearance at a decision point—can increase the odds dramatically. The chances for overall success are also improved by packaging clearances, an approach that is made more feasible and attractive by the opportunities for exchange and side payments thereby created. Relaxing the assumption of independent probabilities at each clearance point and taking into account the possibility of a bandwagon effect—with odds of clearance at later stages improved by earlier clearances having been achieved—further enhances the expectations for success. And recrafting the structure of interdependence among the components of a public program—disaggregating it—so that some can be developed independently of others allows for the addition rather than the multiplication of some of the probabilities in calculating the chances for policy action.

So rather than producing a highly general model of the implementation process that might apply to nearly any situation, Pressman and Wildavsky offer a rather specialized and unusual treatment, when compared to some important and frequently occurring elements of the real world.

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Two further points can be noted about the limitations of their treatment. First, they essentially ignore the role of public management and public managers in assisting the process of converting policy intention into reliable streams of action. As readers of Public Administration Review know very well, public managers can make a sizable difference during the implementation process.

When implementation requires action through a large and complex network of interdependent parties, it may be the case that there is no easy to identify common managerial focal point for concerted action across agencies, governments, sectors, and stakeholders; it may be that “management” in the traditional sense is not always feasible. Still, even—perhaps especially—under such circumstances, some actor(s) may well undertake or be charged with coordinative efforts.

This is a point that is now well recognized in the research literature on implementation, although the label used to refer to such a role varies across researchers—for instance, analysts refer to the “reticulist” function (Friend, Power, and Yewlett 1974), or the facilitator (O’Toole 1983), or the “fixer” (Bardach 1977). By whatever name, ignoring the managerial role is a telling omission; it implies that the fate of the process of policy implementation is largely determined by semi-independent and unsteerable rolls of the dice instead of being influenced at many points by those who take responsibility for helping to make policy work.

Second, it is revealing to take note of Pressman and Wildavsky’s notion of implementation “success”: traversing without blockage the many clearance points standing between policy making, on the one hand, and policy outputs and outcomes, on the other. The
implication might seem to be that a policy is more successfully implemented to the extent that the intention of the policy makers, as expressed in their initial decision, is turned into demonstrable results—regardless of the intentions and objectives of anyone else. Indeed, although the authors clearly recognize that multi-actor implementation often involves rounds of bargaining, their analysis easily can be read as akin to a wishful yearning for a simpler world without so many actors and clearances intruding into the path of policy action.

This point is important, as it suggests that Implementation missed some key aspects of the subject as it is encountered in the practical world. For one thing, fairly often it is difficult at best to discern clearly the intentions of policy makers. From the perspective of Pressman and Wildavsky, “Policies imply theories. Whether stated explicitly or not, policies point to a chain of causation between initial conditions and future consequences. If X, then Y” (xxiii). Oftentimes, however, policies do considerably less—they may point to a problem, perhaps identify one or more institutions such as public agencies whose job it will become to try to figure out a solution, and sometimes offer some resources to help with the job. In other words, policies may involve the initiation of a process of attempting to search for one or more plausible causal theories rather than hypothesizing an explicit chain of causality embedded in, say, a statute or executive order. The authors of Implementation recognize that, in their words, there is often “slippage” (xxiii) during implementation, but they do not fully take into account the inchoate and occasionally incoherent “theories” that can be found in policy.

There is yet another difficulty with the formulation offered by Pressman and Wildavsky. Many actors aside from (for instance) federal policy makers may have a legitimate claim to be part of the process of deciding what to do. Some of them, indeed, reside in places like Oakland. Their participation in negotiating or puzzling through what kinds of actions to put into place may well be seen as something quite different from a set of outlandish links in a Rube Goldberg contraption. To put the matter simply, the main body of Pressman and Wildavsky’s logic implies that implementation can be seen largely as a challenge of top-down compliance. An alternative approach, one that came to be called the bottom-up perspective on policy implementation, conceives of many implementation processes as involving mutual adaptation and multi-actor problem solving (e.g., Berman 1980). Coproduction by many parties in a policy system may be an essential feature of implementation success, in this latter sense; it may even be the case that the provision of significant amounts of discretion to actors far from the “top” is the only route to achieve whatever intent is in fact expressed in formal policy—not merely for political but also for technical reasons. Without digging too deeply into the intramural debates that have been triggered among implementation researchers following Pressman and Wildavsky’s influential study, one can observe that in recent years, most scholars of implementation believe that the most appropriate approach usually involves combining elements of the top-down and bottom-up approaches into an integrated perspective (e.g., O’Toole 2004).

So, while it is not the case that Pressman and Wildavsky’s book reports on the discovery of a completely new subject, and while the theoretical contribution that they offer in this study is limited in a number of respects, it is undeniable that they engaged the world of practice as well as a significant segment of the research community in the exploration of an important subject. The many hundreds of studies of policy implementation that followed, in the United States and around the world, were directly or indirectly catalyzed by this particularly riveting analysis of an EDA project in Oakland. Ironically, perhaps, to the extent that this body of work has contributed to our understanding of implementation in practice and thus improved prospects for converting policy intention into useful action, we can thank Pressman and Wildavsky, the sympathetic but pessimistic harbingers of doom.

Notes
1. In the subsequent editions, the original contents of the book were republished without revision (but see note 3 in the present essay), while additional essays coauthored by Wildavsky were appended to the original study to create an “expanded edition.” The third edition, published in 1984, includes “Implementation as Evolution,” by Giandomenico Majone and Wildavsky (1979); “What Should Evaluation Mean to Implementation?” by Angela Browne and Wildavsky (1983); “Implementation as Mutual Adaptation,” by Browne and Wildavsky (1983); and “Implementation as Exploration,” by Browne and Wildavsky (1983). This edition also contains a new preface, along with the original one. To some extent, the additional essays imply a modification of the analysis offered in the core of the study, without actually engaging that basic
argument directly. In the present essay, attention is focused on the central argument rather than the more discursive essays attached to it later.

2. With the exception of the citation in note 3 of this review, all page references are from the third edition.

3. The first edition of the book actually included an appendix that was crafted to demonstrate the absence of relevant literature: “Use of ‘Implementation’ in Social Science Literature” (166–75). This section even included a cursory review of a few volumes in public administration. The coverage, however, was relatively ad hoc and extremely literal. The appendix was later—wisely—dropped, and the third edition currently in print omits all mention of it. Among the relevant available contributions ignored by the authors were influential studies in organization theory (e.g., Thompson 1967), theoretical contributions regarding administrative behavior (Simon 1947) and decision theory (Lindblom’s 1959 classic on muddling through is relevant in this regard, as is an explicitly implementation-oriented piece by Dufty and Taylor 1962), along with any number of public administrative studies (see Harper, Kramer, and Rouse 1969; Long 1949; Martin 1952).

4. The more general expression for the odds of success, given differing probabilities at different clearance points would be:

\[ P_{\text{Overall}} = \prod_{i=1}^{n} p_i, \]

where \( \prod \) is the symbol for a multiplicative function, \( p_i \) is the probability of agreement at each specific clearance point \( i \), and the other symbols have the meaning explained in the text.

5. It might be noted that it is also possible to theorize about and undertake important systematic empirical research on the circumstances in which multiple self-organizing actors are able to develop cooperative effort to solve a shared problem, such as the sustainable management of common pool resources, perhaps without the direct involvement of government as authoritative actor. This research agenda, which has elements in common with the work of bottom-up implementation analysts, is perhaps best represented by the research contributions of Elinor Ostrom (e.g., 1990, 2005).

References