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## COMMUNITY COMMITMENT IN SPECIAL DISTRICTS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Special districts now constitute about 42% of all U.S. jurisdictions, yet little is known about them. Some critics are concerned that special districts and their staffs have insufficient community commitment. This study, based on a national survey of senior managers in large special districts, examines activities and programs of special district managers that foster community building and engagement, including correlates of these. Study results reveal that special districts are committed to their communities and several strategies and conditions are associated with increased community commitment, such as jobs that focus on community interactions, service type, and ethics management, as well as, to a lesser extent, graduate degree qualifications and charters that specify the role of managers in promoting the public interest and in relation to the board.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Special districts are increasingly common among U.S. public organizations, but still greatly under-researched (Cigler 2011). Special districts are independent government jurisdictions that typically provide services in a single area such as housing,

transportation, parks, business development, libraries, and water management (Eger 2006; Foster 1997; Heikkila and Isett 2007). There are now slightly more special districts than cities (about 37,200 versus 35,800).<sup>1</sup> Special districts are often favored by policymakers for providing services in efficient and business-like ways, but critics often question special districts' community commitment; numerous anecdotal accounts suggest nonchalance towards citizen participation, board membership that gives advantage to special interest business groups, and insufficient community orientation among district staff. Because the legitimacy of local government administration is grounded, in part, on its community orientation and community building, a need exists to better understand the extent of community commitment by special districts, as well as the administrative structures and practices that modify interactions between special district governments and their respective communities (Axelrod 1992; Bacot and Christine 2006; Bauroth 2007a; 2007b; Beitsch 2005; Bordeaux 2004; Grossman 2008; Gulick 1947; Nalbandian 1999; Pope 2008).

This research contributes to filling the knowledge gap in special districts. Specifically, this study addresses two key questions: (1) through which practices do special districts engage with their communities, and (2) how do management practices and structural characteristics affect managers' commitment to their communities? This research reports on a national survey of managers' providing information on community commitment by large special districts concerning a range of programs, activities, and policies.

The few studies that examine the issues of special districts have explored single geographic areas, or single community strategies such as only public hearings or citizen surveys (Heikkila and Isett 2007; Skelcher 2007), or other, albeit relevant matters such as legal and political issues like voting and voter input (Bauroth 2005; 2009; DeYoung 1982; Galvan 2006),<sup>2</sup> board composition (Bauroth 2009; Bollens 1957; Eger 2006; Eger and Feiock 2010; Mitchell 1997), and/or citizen choice and satisfaction (Tiebout 1956; Ostrom, Bish, and Ostrom 1988).<sup>3</sup> Systematic surveys of special districts are sparse, and in addition to considering a range of community activities, we also examine the impact of some management practices and structural characteristics on these.

According to the U.S. Census, special district governments are independent, special-purpose government units that exist as separate entities, having substantial fiscal and administrative independence from general-purpose governments (U.S. Census 2002). Examples of special districts are found in flood control, (e.g., Orleans Levee District), housing (e.g., Boston Housing Authority), libraries (e.g., King County Library System), ports (e.g., Port Authority of New York and New Jersey), as well as airports, parks, highways, and public health.<sup>4</sup> While many special districts are called "authorities" or "districts," only those that exist as an organized entity and have governmental character and substantial autonomy are considered as a special district. Special districts differ from other public agencies, as they are established outside the traditional government structure to provide self-supporting or revenue-producing public goods and services, and are able to exploit complex financial markets with the public purse (Doig 1983; Eger 2011; Mitchell 1991; Smith 1974; Walsh 1978). Although special districts are wholly owned by the establishing

government, they are legally distinct (e.g., they can sue and be sued independently of the establishing government), and their operational management is typically beyond the control and regulations applied to traditional government organizations, providing them with increased freedom from contracting and personnel rules (Eger 2000; Mitchell 1999; Pope 2008; Walsh 1978). Corporatization also provides benefits to the establishing government, as special districts isolate financial risk, reduce the cost of financing, and remove debt or services from financial statements of the establishing governments.

Critics question community commitment by special districts insofar as they operate with business-like values in mind and have fully or partly appointed boards that lack voter accountability, members with strong ties to industry, and little prior public-sector experience. However, experience shows that these conditions are not always wholly present; for example, a recent study shows district managers as having similar commitment to public values as managers in cities (Berman and West 2012).

## COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

This study defines “community commitment” as orientations and actions that further the contribution of public organizations to community building. The term “commitment” builds on the work of Berman and West (2012), who use this term as referring to actions in support of community goals and values—the notion of commitment provides the bridge between values and empirical actions that support values. Community commitment by public organizations takes many forms, and typically is thought to involve community needs assessment, community involvement, and community development (Agranoff 2011; Cottrell 1976; Goodman et al. 1998).

The term “community commitment” is used in many disciplines. In urban affairs, political science, and community development, for example, the existence of various public programs and/or policies is often studied as evidence of a jurisdiction’s community commitment. Many public administration scholars advance an “administrative-centric” perspective that explores government attempts to incorporate citizens in developing, deciding, monitoring, and evaluating government policies or programs (e.g., Wang 2001; King and Cruickshank 2010; Yang and Callahan 2007; Nalbandian 2005; Langston 1978). Some studies focus on a comprehensive measurement of local governments’ citizen engagement efforts, whereas other studies concentrate on specific participation mechanisms such as budgeting, performance measurement, and strategic planning (Poister and Streib 1999; 2005; Rivenbark 2003; Ebdon 2000; 2002; Franklin and Carberry-George 1999). Though different terms are sometimes used (e.g., community engagement, community capacity-building), a common theme is that the concept of “community commitment”: (1) is frequently defined as practices, programs, or policies that foster community development, cohesion, or support for public programs and (2) includes multiple dimensions that concern different aspects of knowledge, problem solving, decision making, and action (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Glickman and Servon 2008; Goodman et al. 1998).<sup>5</sup>

This study conceptualizes special district community commitment in four key dimensions that reflect roles in knowledge accumulation, decision making, and action: (1) community research, (2) community involvement in decision making, (3) community-focused staff interactions with the governing board, and (4) giving priority to community development. The second and third dimensions, in particular, reflect the fact that special district managers, staff, and governing boards are “knowledge bearers” cultivating close ties to their community. Together, these four dimensions describe practices through which special districts and senior special district managers and their staff engage with their communities (study question 1).

The first dimension, community research, is defined as objective and research-based understanding such as by staff commissioning studies about community needs and the impact of proposed policies or programs. This provides a comprehensive understanding of specific community issues and needs, and local history that helps establish policy priorities, understand constraints, and facilitate responsive implementation (Lempa et al. 2008; Parsons et al. 1990; Stivers 1994). Some anecdotal concerns are that special districts and managers may limit their community understanding to business matters only (such as matters affecting service delivery and revenue maximization), and that special district management and staff often use informal information-gathering and decision-making methods, rather than research-based ones (Henriques 1986; Nunn and Schoedel 1997).

The second dimension views community outreach, collaboration, and buy-in as a foundation for success in governance initiatives (e.g., French and Folz 2005; Goodman et al. 1998). Various authors (e.g., Botes and Van Rensburg 2000) discuss the importance of including many sectors of the community before making major policy decisions, but Mitchell (1991) finds special district managers to be less attentive to process and community participation, and more technocratic, focusing on business performance.

The third dimension is community-focused staff interactions with boards, which keep board members informed of community interests and ensure that staff insights are reflected in board deliberations and conclusions (Ashworth 2001). Elected officials help ensure programs remain a community-oriented priority, and receive funding and top-down support (Steiner 2008), so the involvement of elected officials deserves separate attention. Managers interface with board members by encouraging board members to solicit community participation, and by examining the impact of proposed programs on different community segments (Heikkila and Isett 2007; Morcol et al. 2008). The impact of different types of boards is discussed further.

The fourth dimension focuses on actions that promote community development, such as policies and programs that preserve the strengths of communities and help them move forward. Examples can be found in public administration studies that focus on one or more specific actions, such as intergroup relations, mediation, “bottom-up” processes of change, or coordinating groups to help the community achieve fair and balanced development (e.g., Westoby 2008).

This conceptualization identifies a broad range of areas through which special districts show community commitment. An operational measure of community commitment, discussed further, identifies specific actions (e.g., “staff commissions

studies that help us better understand the community”) that managers and their organizations may undertake addressing the first study question, that is, through which practices special districts engage with their communities. Of course, the above dimensions do not simply describe community in special districts, but could be used to describe most other organizations, as well.

## HYPOTHESES

The above section conceptualizes the concept of community commitment, and we now formulate hypotheses about factors that may affect it. Specifically, the second study question is: Which management practices and structural characteristics affect community commitment in special districts? We develop six hypotheses (some with subparts) that, somewhat uniquely (compared to existing research), include not only concerns from within urban affairs and allied literatures, but also modern themes from public administration. Regarding the latter, we examine impacts of: (1) dedicated purposes and jobs, (2) staffing for these jobs, and (3) values clarification and strengthening. Although public-value commitment may be similar between managers in municipalities and special districts (Berman and West 2012), community commitment is affected by more than managerial values; it is affected by both managerial actions and organizational structure. As previously noted, special districts are commonly organized as corporate in structure, which may influence the community commitment of special districts since structure may isolate the special district from the direct political process which allows constituents to affect the behavior of government (Eger 2000; Eger and Feiock 2010).

The literature on the financial behaviors of special districts highlights the influences of the legal form, the degree of autonomy and power allowed by the enabling legislation, and the role the enabling legislation plays in the control of special districts (Eger 2000; 2006). Given the separation of special districts from the democratically elected local government, managers may perceive legal and political distance from their community as isolation from the community they serve. This perception of isolation can be reduced by having charters whose primary purpose is active engagement with communities.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, written charters exist that specify the roles of managers to promote the public interest (Nice 1998), and we hypothesize that such charters may also prompt managers of special districts to increase understanding of their communities and involve local stakeholders. Such written charters also offer extra leverage to managers in their dealings with governing boards. We also hypothesize that community commitment is increased by positions whose main purpose involves community interaction, such as working with citizens, community leaders, or other agencies in the community. Employees who perform these tasks often hear about community concerns and subsequently disseminate this information to managers and others in the organization, and may increase awareness about the need for community participation.

Of course, some countervailing concerns are that jobs can be isolated and marginalized in ways that give them little impact and charters alone may have little impact

when not acted upon. Hence, it is not certain that such charters and positions as discussed above have much impact. We thus examine the following hypotheses:

- H1a: Special districts' whose charters specify the role of managers in promoting the public interest increase community commitment.
- H1b: Positions that focus primarily on community interaction in special districts are positively associated with community commitment.

Successful special district managers are said to require competencies that “combine practical business skills with community knowledge and consciousness” (Smith 2008). Community commitment certainly involves these, including leadership skills for engaging citizens, community leaders, and other public officials. Graduate education is hypothesized to further community commitment by increased emphasis on professionalism, ethical responsibility, and decision making involving complex problems that foster these orientations and skills, while public administration education additionally also emphasizes citizen participation, community development, and public leadership (Bowman, West, and Beck 2010; Menzel 1997; 2012; Yoder and Denhardt 2001; Shareef 2010; West and Berman 2006). Indeed, Perry (1997) finds that professional identification by MPA students is significantly associated with commitment to the public interest. However, counter-arguments are that some graduate degrees surely do not address public sector complexities (e.g., in science), or that professionalism is a double-edged sword that may cut both toward and away from democracy (e.g., by fostering a belief in technocracy [Perry 1997]). It is also possible that some public administration programs may create more awareness than actual skill, and that appropriate orientations are not always pursued in practice. Hence we examine,

- H2a: Increasing the prevalence of professional positions with graduate degrees in special districts increases community commitment.
- H2b: Community commitment is higher in special districts whose managers have public administration degrees.

While organizations have traditionally relied primarily on competitive recruitment and rule enforcement to ensure officials' commitment to the community they serve, many contemporary scholars regard these practices/mechanisms as insufficient for acquiring and maintaining a community, public-service-oriented workforce (Lewis and Gilman 2005; Svava 2007). Community commitment is a basic value (Menzel 2010; Thompson and Leidlein 2009), and it is increasingly held that “values management” is important in organizations to ensure that priorities are implemented. In recent years, ethics management is one of several direct ways of giving meaning to values, along with surveillance and sanctioning (Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, and Umphress 2003). Though ethics management is sometimes misunderstood as being foremost concerned with minimizing legal wrong-doing, ethics management, with its formal and informal infrastructure, has become increasingly important for

articulating and reinforcing activities that bring core values into evidence, including community interactions. However, while ethics management encourages responsiveness to community interests, some Codes of Ethics and Standards of Conduct caution public sector managers about direct involvement in local politics. In practice, local government administrators are already engaged in facilitative leadership at the community level, and for some it has become comfortable (Gibson et al. 2005). Hence, we (somewhat provocatively) examine:

H3: Ethics management is positively associated with community commitment in special districts.

Management alone may not fully control community commitment within special districts. Therefore, this study also examines structural characteristics. The literature on the structure of special districts separates out special-district service type into categories that include fire protection, utilities, other services (inclusive of parks and recreation, libraries, cemetery, and other single functions), transportation, environmental and development, and multiservice (Eger and Feiock 2010). Eger and Feiock (2010) show that the type of service provided confounds the financial behavior of special districts, leading to the structure of special districts as a contributing factor to the concerns of critics that districts give insufficient attention to community concerns. Direct services that affect a broad population and/or those that receive more extensive media attention may require greater community commitment. Examples include health care (Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman 1996), parks and libraries, as well as highways, airports, and ports, which often receive significant media attention since they affect regional and local economic development (Gillen and Waters 1996), quality of life decisions, and government objectives (Button et al. 1995; Talley 1996). By contrast, services that are seldom in the news, such as water conservation, fire protection, sewage, utilities, cemeteries, and services that only affect a targeted subset of a population (Howard and Crompton 1984), such as mental health services and jails, are expected to require lower levels of community commitment. Hence,

H4: Community commitment is higher among transportation, health, library and parks special district governments than other districts.

We hypothesize that community commitment varies depending on the size of the special district. Simply, larger special districts<sup>7</sup> may have more resources to afford professional staff (Eger and Feiock 2010) and offer dedicated services, and are thus hypothesized to have the capacity for greater community commitment (French and Folz 2005; Mizany and Manatt 2002). In a recent study of citizen academies, Morse (2012) notes that “it is reasonable to assume that the rate of program offerings declines as the size of the jurisdiction (city) decreases.” Yang and Callahan (2007) also find a modest but significant relationship between size and the use of participation mechanisms. There are no studies showing negative associations with size.



This is a different argument than that made by Dahl, who argues that *citizens* in large jurisdictions are less inclined to engage in civic participation (Oliver 2000). By contrast, we focus on efforts by *jurisdictions* to enhance community building, and it could be further argued that tendencies toward lesser citizen participation in larger cities could prompt these cities towards undertaking even more efforts. Hence,

H5: Community commitment is higher in larger special districts than smaller districts.

Some special district governing boards are elected to their positions, but other boards have some or all of their members appointed. A key question is whether the selection process produces different incentives for members affecting their community commitment. The literature on board member selection and community commitment is decidedly sparse, allowing for a wide range of arguments. Eger (2006) argues that elected boards in special districts are the most autonomous and thus are more responsive to specific constituent needs due to re-election pressures and desires, than appointed boards, but Frant (1997) notes that incentives to maximize political support may lead elected board members to accommodate the special interests rather than community interests. Regarding appointed boards, Mitchell (1997) finds that board members appointed by a legislative body gave a relatively high ranking to the representation of group interests, an indication that when legislators are given the authority to select board members, they often appoint people who will represent particular districts or constituencies. In comparison, ex-officio board members, elected members serving on an appointed board, gave high rankings consistent with following the preferences of elected officials (Eger 2006; Mitchell 1997; Walsh 1978). Health services studies indicate that appointed board members act as stakeholders for the communities they serve, with a responsibility to be committed to their communities (Roberts and Connors 1998). Studies of citizen participation in cities point more generally to the role of appointed and elected officials, and Yang and Callahan (2007) conclude that council-manager forms of government, which involve appointed managers, increase the use of involvement mechanisms, which Nalbandian (1991) and Ebdon (2002) also find. However, other citizen participation studies fail to find significant relations (Wang 2001; Yang and Pandey 2011).

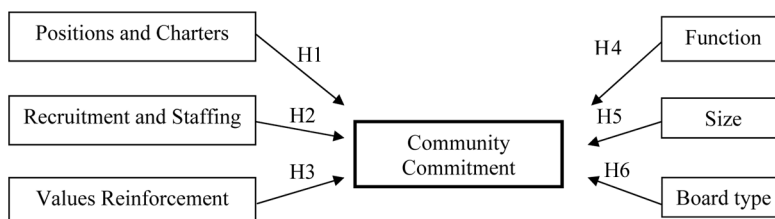


Figure 1. Variable Relationships.

Based on limited literature, we formulate the following hypothesis (based on Eger's constituency responsiveness argument), noting that a negative relationship favors alternative arguments:

H6: Community commitment is higher in special districts with elected boards than those with appointed boards.

Summarizing, the main relations of this study are shown in Figure 1.

## DATA AND METHODS

To examine the community commitment of special districts, we conducted a survey of agency directors in 485 large special districts in the U.S., with "large" special districts initially being defined by the Census of Governments as those having annual revenues or expenditures of at least \$10 million or debts larger than \$20 million. The sampling frame for this study is selected from special districts with at least 75 employees (excluding hospitals).<sup>8</sup> The rationale for the latter criterion is to ensure that the sample includes operating organizations.<sup>9</sup> We refer to these as "large" special districts because they are the largest of special districts in the U.S., although public organizations with, for example, 75 employees are not very large compared to other governmental jurisdictions. These districts were selected from a national list provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce. We administered the 256-item survey by mail, and respondents returned the completed questionnaire in a business reply envelope. We utilized the tailored design method (Dillman 2007) with two follow-ups to help increase participation in the survey. The survey was conducted in 2008. The response rate was 44.3% ( $N=215$ ). Table 1 shows respondents' and districts' profiles. The median number of employees is 221, and only 5.5% of these special districts have more than 2,000 employees.

Content validity is an important concern. We seek respondents' assessments (perceptions) of matters that can be empirically observed, and about which respondents are likely to be familiar as a result of their job duties. For example, we ask respondents to assess whether their organization involves many sectors of the community before making major policy decisions, and whether the executive director encourages discussions with the board about public participation. These refer to empirical phenomena about which senior managers are appropriate informants.<sup>10</sup> We pilot tested the survey to determine whether questions were clear and unambiguous. Where necessary, survey items were revised based on pilot results. We assessed construct validity through triangulation with other survey items. We also stated survey items as much as possible as observable actions, policies, strategies. Although there may be biases in respondents' observations or reporting, there is no reason to assume biases among respondents.

Further, we examined sample bias by comparing the responses of respondents by title, addressees, length of service in their jurisdictions, familiarity with the performance of their organizations, age, and gender. While a few differences exist, they

**TABLE 1**  
Respondent and District Profile

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Response rate—44.3% of recipients responded, $n = 215$
Respondent job title—73.8% are the executive director of the special district; 24.6% are director of administrative services, deputy executive director, chief of staff, vice president of operations, or HR director
Respondent familiarity with the performance of their jurisdiction—92.7% state they are very familiar
Respondent years working in present organization: 16.9 years
Respondents' characteristics
• Education: 92.9% bachelor's degree, 59.3% master's degree
• Highest degree: 27.6% in public administration, urban planning or political science; 32% in sub-fields of business administration; 11.2% in engineering; 6% in psychology, counseling or social work; 3.6% in law; 19.6% in other fields
• Age: 11.9% younger than 45; 29.5% between 45 and 54 years; 58.5% over 54 years
• Gender: 79.2% male
Special districts' characteristics
• Average number of employees: 499
• Average number of additional contract employees: 116
• District functions: 20.5% sewage and water, 16.9% housing and community development, 13.3% public mass transit, 13.3% parks and recreation, 7.2% public health, 6.2% air- and seaports, 5.6% libraries, 3.1% fire, 2.1% utilities, 6.7% multi-functional districts, 5.1% other functions

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are relatively minor; for example, the mean number of employees in the population of large special districts is 533 compared to 499 in the sample. Notwithstanding our relatively high response rate of 44.7%, we also conducted a survey of 35 non-respondents to examine for possible bias among those who responded. We obtained their participation by calling them and asking them to participate in a shorter survey of 10 items; most agreed as is consistent with our prior experience with this approach. Based on 10 items, which we randomly selected from our survey, we conclude that differences are small and not significantly associated with community commitment.<sup>11</sup> We also find no significant differences between early and late mail survey respondents regarding perceptions of community commitment. We do not see evidence of self-selection bias.

### Variables

As noted above, a special district's community commitment, as operationalized, is comprised of its community research, community involvement in decision making, community-focused staff interactions with the governing board, and community-development orientation. We measure these dimensions with 10 Likert-type scale items (7 = *strongly agree* and 1 = *strongly disagree*; please refer to the Appendix for the measurement of variables). Community research is the combination of two items: "Staff commissions studies that help us better understand the needs of the

community” and “Staff commissions studies that help us better understand the impact of proposals policies or programs on the community” ( $\alpha = .79$ ).<sup>12</sup> Community involvement in decision making involves three items: “We have both formal and informal discussions with business leaders,” “We have both formal and informal discussions with community leaders (not business),” and “Senior managers reach out to elected officials in the community” ( $\alpha = .62$ ).<sup>13</sup> Community-focused staff interactions with the governing board involve three items: “We help the governing board to evaluate the impact of proposed policies or programs on different segments of the community,” “The director encourages board discussions about public participation,” and “The executive director encourages board discussions about how we can best serve the community” ( $\alpha = .80$ ).<sup>14</sup> Community-results orientation is measured by two items: “We focus on helping the community move forward” and “We do a good job at preserving the strengths of the community.” ( $\alpha = .78$ ).<sup>15</sup> We also create a global index variable by summing up these 10 items ( $\alpha = .81$ ). The above footnotes contain additional literature-based justifications for these measures. In addition to the use of Cronbach  $\alpha$ , we employ exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine whether these dimensions are distinctive with each other. The results support our typology, showing that they fall into four categories.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the independent variables, we present size in a logarithmic form of full-time employees. Regarding service area, our data contain 16 different types of special district governments. Libraries, parks, health organizations, transportation authorities, ports, and airports are coded as 1, whereas others are coded as 0.<sup>17</sup> Enforcing ethics standards is an index of six 1–7 Likert scale items ( $\alpha = .80$ ). These items include both static rules and dynamic practices.<sup>18</sup> We measure professional qualifications by asking respondents whether professional jobs require a master’s degree. We also include the percentage of the senior management team with public administration degrees to further understand whether public administration education is accompanied by the increase of community commitment. We use two dummy items to capture whether an organization has job positions for community interactions (with other public agencies and citizens). High internal consistency ( $KR20 = .76$ ) allows us to combine them.<sup>19</sup> Having charters that specify the role of managers is measured by two items related to board interaction and promoting the public interest ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Finally, we categorize board types into three groups: elected board, appointed board, and mixed board. We use appointed board as the base for regression analysis.

Our data set of 2,795 data points has 104 missing values (3.7%), which affect about 30% of respondents. Missing cases may inflate standard errors and influence the reliability of regression (Acuna and Rodriguez 2004). Due to this concern, we use data imputation methods. Although mean imputation or median imputation has been employed in many previous studies, they suffer from several drawbacks, such as underestimated variance and biased correlation (Acuna and Rodriguez 2004; Howell 2009; Wayman 2003). We use expected maximization (EM), a method popularly used in psychological research (see, for example, de Haan, Prinzie, and Deković 2010; Hudry and Slaughter 2009), for data imputation in the present study. Before the data can be imputed with EM estimation, it is necessary to test whether

missing values are completely at random (MCAR) with Little's MCAR test. The null hypothesis of this test is that data are missing completely at random, and our test shows that our missing values are MCAR ( $p < .78$ ), allowing us to impute data with EM. Because EM is not suitable for binary variables and categorical variables, we exclude board composition, district type, and positions handling community interaction from imputation.<sup>20</sup> We employ the Huber-White correction to address heteroscedasticity in our data; reporting our results with the robust standard errors.<sup>21</sup> We test for multicollinearity using variance inflation factors.

## RESULTS

The key research questions of this study include: (1) through which practices do special districts engage with their communities, and (2) how do management practices and structural characteristics affect special districts' commitment to their communities? Both literature and factor analysis support that special districts engage with their communities through four different channels.

We provide descriptive statistics in Table 2. Our survey results indicate that community-focused board interactions have the highest ( $M = 6.21$ ) among the four dimensions of community commitment, whereas community research is the lowest

**TABLE 2**  
Descriptive Statistics

	<i>Items in Scale</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Dependent variables						
Community commitment index (sum-up)	10	215	5.74	0.69	3.60	7
Community research	2	215	4.95	1.31	1.50	7
Community involvement in decision making	3	215	5.78	0.83	3.33	7
Community-focused board interaction	3	215	6.21	0.76	3.33	7
Community development orientation	2	215	5.88	0.94	2	7
Independent variables						
Community interaction jobs	2	211	1.55	0.75	0	2
Charters specifying managers' roles	2	215	4.49	1.51	1	7
Professional jobs requiring an MA degree	1	215	3.69	1.81	1	7
Senior managers having a public administration degree in percentage	1	215	0.12	0.16	0	1
Ethics management	6	215	5.91	0.82	2	7
Service type	1	211	0.47	0.50	0	1
Size (log)	1	215	5.65	1.07	0	8.85
Appointed board	1	197	0.60	0.49	0	1
Elected board	1	197	0.32	0.47	0	1
Mix board	1	197	0.07	0.26	0	1

**TABLE 3**  
Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Community commitment index (sum-up)	1.00														
2. Community research	0.76	1.00													
3. Community involvement in decision making	0.76	0.43	1.00												
4. Community-focused board interaction	0.70	0.30	0.46	1.00											
5. Community development orientation	0.57	0.31	0.24	0.28	1.00										
6. Community interaction jobs	0.24	0.16	0.22	0.15	0.13	1.00									
7. Charters specifying managers' roles	0.17	0.11	0.11	0.15	0.07	0.04	1.00								
8. Professional jobs requiring an MA degree	0.18	0.15	0.12	0.17	0.01	0.07	0.05	1.00							
9. Senior managers having a public administration degree in %	0.20	0.16	0.17	0.11	0.08	0.09	0.02	-0.04	1.00						
10. Ethics management	0.45	0.25	0.30	0.42	0.27	0.05	0.18	0.05	0.07	1.00					
11. Service type	0.29	0.19	0.24	0.21	0.19	0.05	-0.10	0.19	0.00	0.08	1.00				
12. Size (log)	0.23	0.26	0.16	0.12	0.03	0.17	-0.05	0.12	0.04	0.13	0.32	1.00			
13. Appointed board	-0.04	-0.10	0.00	0.01	-0.02	0.06	-0.02	0.03	-0.10	0.19	-0.01	-0.06	1.00		
14. Elected board	-0.01	0.08	-0.03	-0.10	0.01	-0.04	0.04	-0.01	0.06	-0.20	-0.02	0.02	-0.86	1.00	
15. Mix board	0.10	0.05	0.05	0.15	0.02	-0.04	-0.04	-0.06	0.08	0.02	0.06	0.07	-0.34	-0.19	1.00

$p < .05$  when coefficient  $> .14$ ;  $p < .01$  when coefficient  $> .18$ .

**TABLE 4**  
OLS Regression

	<i>Community Commitment Index</i> Coef. (Beta)	<i>Community Research</i> Coef. (Beta)	<i>Involvement in Decision Making</i> Coef. (Beta)	<i>Board-Focused Interaction</i> Coef. (Beta)	<i>Development Orientation</i> Coef. (Beta)
Community interaction jobs	0.22 (0.24)**	0.25 (0.14)*	0.21 (0.19)**	0.15 (0.15)*	0.20 (0.16)*
Charters specifying managers' roles	0.06 (0.13)*	0.08 (0.10)	0.07 (0.13)*	0.04 (0.08)	0.02 (0.03)
Professional jobs requiring an MA degree	0.04 (0.12)*	0.06 (0.08)	0.02 (0.04)	0.07 (0.16)*	-0.01 (-0.01)
Senior managers having a public administration degree	0.62 (0.15)*	1.07 (0.14)*	0.72 (0.14)*	0.39 (0.09)	0.21 (0.04)
Ethics management	0.33 (0.40)**	0.32 (0.20)**	0.28 (0.28)**	0.33 (0.36)**	0.31 (0.27)**
Service type	0.33 (0.24)**	0.36 (0.14)*	0.36 (0.22)**	0.23 (0.15)*	0.48 (0.25)**
Size (log)	-0.01 (-0.01)	0.14 (0.10)	0.01 (-0.01)	-0.05 (-0.06)	-0.16 (-0.16)*
Elected board	0.14 (0.10)	0.38 (0.14)*	0.06 (0.03)	0.01 (0.01)	0.16 (0.08)
Mix board	0.27 (0.10)	0.32 (0.06)	0.12 (0.04)	0.43 (0.15)*	0.09 (0.03)
Constant	2.80**	0.90	3.18**	3.74**	4.36**
<i>N</i>	194	194	194	194	194
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.40	0.19	0.25	0.28	0.16
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.37	0.16	0.21	0.24	0.11

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

( $M = 4.95$ ). Community involvement in decision making ( $M = 5.78$ ) and community-development orientation ( $M = 5.88$ ) are in between. On average, special districts are committed to their communities ( $M = 5.74$  for the global index).

In addition to descriptive statistics, we provide the correlation matrix<sup>22</sup> in Table 3, and we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to test our hypotheses. The regression results are reported in Table 4.

Results in Table 4 show that the model of community commitment supports many of the hypotheses. Our hypotheses are stated with regard to the aggregate index of community commitment, and we find that positions that focus primarily on community interaction (H1b), ethics management (H3), and service type (H4) are significantly associated with this index at the 1% level, while charters specifying managers' roles (H1a), professional jobs requiring an MA degree (H2a), and senior managers having a public administration degree (H2b) have support at the 5% level. Board type and size type are not significantly associated with community commitment, and these hypotheses are therefore not supported. Table 4 also shows the beta coefficients so readers can quickly capture the relative importance of each variable. Table 5 summarizes this study's main predictions and findings.

Our main analysis centers on the aggregate index of community commitment, but results for its four dimensions, shown as individual sub-models, provide additional analysis and specification. Table 4 readily shows that across the four dimensions of community commitment, ethics management is statistically significant in all models. It also has the highest beta value (0.34) in the aggregate model, and the importance of this variable is discussed in the next section. In the sub-model "community research," the coefficient of elected board is positive and statistically significant, in line with our H6. The sub-model "involvement in decision making" more readily follows the results in the aggregate model. The sub-model "board-focused interactions" shows mixed boards associated with increased board focused interactions ( $p < .05$ ), and we discuss this result in the next section. Regarding the sub-model "community development orientation," we find that the variables of positions for

**TABLE 5**  
Summary of Results

	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Prediction</i>	<i>Results (Full Model)</i>
H1a	Charters specifying managers' roles	+	Supported
H1b	Community interaction jobs	+	Supported
H2a	Professional jobs requiring an MA degree	+	Supported
H2b	Senior managers having a public administration degree	+	Supported
H3	Ethics management	+	Supported
H4	Service type	+	Supported
H5	Organizational size	+	Rejected
H6	Elected boards	+	Rejected



community interaction, ethics management, and service type are strongly associated with helping the community and preserving its strengths. The coefficient of district size, contrary to our hypothesis, is negative and statistically significant. This probably reflects Dahl's view that citizens in large jurisdictions are less inclined to engage in civic participation (Oliver 2000), as we addressed earlier.<sup>23</sup>

## DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

A major focus of this study is to assess special districts' community commitment, and administrative and structural factors that strengthen it. Our hypotheses focus on factors associated with our aggregate index of community commitment. Our findings are clear: factors most strongly effecting community commitment are establishing positions that focus on community interactions, ethics management, and service type.

However, some factors have only weak or even no support in our data. First, we hypothesized that larger organizations may have more resources or specialization that further community interactions, but we find little evidence to support this idea. Across all models, size lacks multivariate support. Large organizations may have established processes relating to community commitment, and being larger does not necessarily change these very much. The relationship between size and community commitment is not necessarily a simple one, and likely mediated by other considerations.

Second, we hypothesized that community commitment is higher among special districts with an elected board than those having an appointed board. However, this hypothesis is supported in only one sub-model (community research) but not supported in the aggregate model. In the sub-model of board-focused interaction, we find that districts with mixed boards have a positive impact when compared to either elected or appointed boards. Although this outcome is perplexing given the limited literature on special district boards, we find that the theoretical explanation in Mitchell (1997) is consistent with our results.

In our mixed board measurement, both a focus on representation of group interest and of elected officials preferences are present. This may explain our outcome for mixed boards; greater diversity of motivations and interests may be conducive to discussions about different interests and roles regarding community commitment, complicating the ability of focal interests to dominate a board's outcomes (Andrews et al. 2009; Light 2005). However, similar to Mitchell (1997) and Walsh (1978), the effect in the majority of our models is either minimal or statistically insignificant.

Third, we find that education matters, but not much, as is indicated by the magnitude of the betas. The impact of professional degrees is significant. Among the sub-models, requiring a master's degree is only predictive of board-focused interaction.

Fourth, it has indeed become accepted that leaders must articulate values, and give impetus to these values, as well. Leaders must work with staff to give meaning to them (Ashworth 2001; Liff 2007; Grant 2012). Our study shows that processes of discussing

and enforcing ethics standards and professional norms are often precursors to community involvement. Ethics management brings community values and troublesome interactions into focus as a topic of discussion. The importance of having such discussions about what organizations ought to be doing should not be overlooked as a means to increasing awareness.

Community commitment involves putting values into practice, and our empirical results provide insight into practices that have been called “the black box of government learning” (Blindenbacher 2010). This study has some caveats and limitations. The sampling frame consists of large special districts. While the study results are generalizable only to other large special districts, large special districts account for 35.2% of employment in special districts, and the reason for selecting them is that they *may* have adequate human and financial resources for engaging their communities. Next, our assessments are based on the perceptions of senior managers only; others, such as lower-level managers, employees, or community leaders, may hold different views about the district’s community commitment. Third, our measures of community commitment are necessarily subjective as no hard, “objective” data exist about the topics under discussion.<sup>24</sup> Despite considerable precautions to identify measurement errors, no subjective data are free from the possibility of some distortion and measurement error; measurement imperfections are embedded in the study concepts. Fourth, no study can assess all aspects of community commitment or administrative processes; quite obviously, choices must be made and we leave it for future studies to explore other aspects or specific strategies. Other caveats and observations are noted in the endnote.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study develops a multi-dimensional measure of community commitment, and examines the impact of managerial strategies and other correlates on it in large special districts. Community commitment involves community research, community involvement, community-focused board interaction, and involvement. Based on the perceptions of senior managers, community commitment is higher in transportation, health, library, and park special districts than in special districts that provide other services. This study finds that, indeed, several different administrative processes are working together to increase community commitment, notably ethics management. While we hesitate to make generalizations beyond the study sample, the relatively modest size of large special districts in the U.S suggests that the results may be relevant to smaller public organizations, as well.

## NOTES

1. Specifically, there are 37,203 special districts and 35,886 municipalities and townships according to the latest decennial Census of 2012. This represents about 42% of all governmental units, up from 20% of governmental units in the 1970s, and 10% in the 1950s (12,340 in 1952). In 2002, the number of special districts and cities were about the same (35,356 and 35,937; U.S. Census 2012; 2002).

2. Also Burns 1994; Hamilton 1988; Hankerson 1956; Manson 1987; McDowell and Ugone 1982.

3. Other systematic research on special districts, while growing, deals with other matters such as job satisfaction, local boundary change, governing arrangements, district incorporation and dissolution (Bauroth 2009; Beitsch 2005; Feiock and Carr 2001; West and Berman 2009).

4. The Census definition excludes school districts. Most special-purpose districts perform services in a single function, but some are authorized by their enabling legislation to provide services in several different functions. According to a 2002 Census, about 91% perform a single function (U.S. Census 2002). The classification of an entity as a special district requires judgment of the criteria mentioned in the text.

5. Relevant examples of literature in community development and policy studies include Conroy and Berke 2004; Beebe et al. 2001; Shepherd and Rothenbuhler 2001; Hunter and Staggenborg 1986. Within public administration, "community commitment" is also part of such broader constructs as public service motivation and "publicness." This study, and its measures, focus on specific activities mentioned in the text.

6. The phrase "positions whose primary purpose is active engagement with communities" should not be confused with job titles of positions such as "community relations" which, in practice, do not necessarily involve much active engagement (e.g., only media releases). The survey items use the term "job" and clearly refer to people in organizations whose main work activity is foremost active engagement with their community.

7. "Large" refers to the organization, such as by number of employees or budget, rather than the geographic size of service area.

8. Hospitals are excluded because individual patient health care may not be foremost affected by community values explored here. Even though some public hospitals also have broad, community-based public health roles, these are but a fraction of total operations. This study does include organizations whose primary focus is public health. Also, as defined by the census, the term "special district governments" excludes school district governments (U.S. Census 2002).

9. A reason for studying *operating* organizations is that our interests and survey items include organizations having jobs whose main purpose is coordinating with other public agencies or working with citizens and community leaders. Large operating organizations are more likely to have such jobs on account of direct contacts with citizens and task specialization, than smaller organizations that lack resources, staff, or specialization (Carver 1973; Christenson and Sachs 1980; DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Lyons and Lowery 1989). However, none of this should be taken to imply that smaller organizations or those with less staff could not have such jobs; indeed, it is conceivable that a special district which contracts for its service delivery chooses to have such positions in support of its management/policy functions. The extent of such possibilities is both beyond knowledge and our study population. Our study conclusions are limited to the study population, and we hope that future studies might examine such issues in other study populations.

10. As so little has been systematically researched about special districts, it seems reasonable to us to study top managers who are customarily assumed to have a broad overview of their organizations' activities. This is analogous to why many studies of local government survey city managers. Also, some questions concern interactions with the board about which they are assumed to be knowledgeable based on their responsibilities.

11. We follow Whitehead, Groothuis, and Blomquist's (1993) analysis for non-response bias. Non-respondents were contacted by phone. For example, respondents and non-respondents do not vary much by how many years they have worked in their organization (16.9 vs. 15.1 years,

$p > .05$ ), nor do they vary in perceptions of the importance of accountability to the governing board (very important or important: 77.6% vs. 80.0%,  $p > .05$ ), or helping the board to assess the impact of program and policies and segment of the community (strongly agree or agree: 91.0% vs. 94.3%,  $p > .05$ ).

12. This is supported by Goodman et al. (1998), discussed in the text earlier.

13. Botes and Van Rensburg (2000, 53) note “selective participatory practices can be avoided when development workers seek out various sets of interest rather than listening only to a few community leaders and prominent figures.”

14. A smooth interaction between board and executive directors is a key factor of board effectiveness (Herman and Renz 2004). Board practices should include whether executive officers provide suggestions or reactions regarding missions and community interests in nonprofit board governance.

15. Contemporary community development literature covers community-development orientation items selected in the current study. Botes and Van Rensburg (2000), for example, suggest that those who want to get involved in community development should respect the community’s indigenous contribution as manifested in their knowledge and guard against the domination of some interest groups. In addition, they should also serve as good facilitators and catalysts of development that assist and stimulate the community to move forward.

16. We use EFA on our 10 items, and find that four factors are present. One item, “Senior Managers reach out to elected officials in the community,” loads moderately, at 0.40, on the construct community involvement, and all other items load at 0.72 or greater on each of the constructs. We support our EFA by testing the discriminant validity of the four constructs identified. We use average variance extracted analysis (AVE), as found in Fornell and Larcker (1981), which tests to see if the square root of every AVE value belonging to each latent construct is much larger than any correlation among any pair of latent constructs. We find that the square root of the AVE for community research is .78, community involvement in decision making is .80, community-focused board interactions is .87, and community development orientation is .80. All the square roots of the AVEs for our constructs are substantially larger than any of the correlations between any of the constructs which range from .24 to .46. This test for discriminant validity supports the validity of our EFA. We choose to use index variables (sum-up items) instead of saved factor scores due to the following reasons. First, variables designed to measure these four dimensions are well grounded in existing literature. Since they are conceptually distinctive, Cronbach’s alpha and sum-up indices are as appropriate as factor scores. Second, it is easier to interpret index variables than factor scores (for example, it is sensible to state “having a job handling community interaction increases 0.22 of community commitment,” but not “having a job handling community interaction increases 0.13 of factor score.” Third, we investigate how independent variables used in this study predict “general community commitment,” which sums up all 10 dependent variable items. Finally, scholars often use index variables when distinctive factors as determined by EFA are available, such as those who study public service motivation (e.g., Moynihan and Pandey 2007).

17. Other types of special district governments include the following functions: utility, housing, water preservation, river, fire protection, civic center, parking, jail, and road sanitation.

18. The items of “We have a code of ethics” and “We have a code of conduct” have been widely used in the studies of organizational ethics (e.g., Laouris, Laouri, and Christakis 2008). We also consider whether an organization promotes professional norms to the extent that “a profession’s code of ethics is perhaps its most visible and explicit enunciation of its professional norms” (Frankel 1989). In studying codes of ethics, Palidauskaite (2006) asserts that transparency and openness are the core principles of public service, so we consider whether organizations “have extensive practices to provide openness and transparency in all

our administrative decisions and practices.” Finally, “We have an active program to enforce ethics standards” and “Unethical conducts are dealt with harshly” concern whether dynamic practices of ethics management exist in an organization. Koh and Boo (2001) employed conceptually similar items such as “Top management in my organization has clearly conveyed that unethical behavior will not be tolerated” and “If a manager in my organization is discovered to have engaged in unethical behavior, he will be promptly reprimanded even if the behavior results primarily in corporate gain” to capture the essence of ethical behaviors.

19. The Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) is a measure of internal consistency reliability for measures with dichotomous choices, first published in 1937. It is analogous to Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ .

20. Multiple imputation (MI) is an alternative method. MI generates at least five different estimates to provide pooled results for regression. However, this method cannot generate  $R^2$  for regression. In addition, variable coefficients in the regression models with EM imputation and MI imputation are very similar and do not affect study conclusions. Due to these reasons, we choose EM as the imputation method in the present study.

21. OLS regression with robust standard errors cannot generate adjusted  $R^2$ . Adjusted  $R^2$  in the model with community-focused staff interactions with the governing board as the DV was obtained before we employed robust standard errors.

22. A debatable issue notwithstanding, we treat items on the 1~7 Likert scale (e.g., qualification increasing and qualification MA) as continuous variables, allowing us to use Pearson’s correlation. Phi correlation values are applied to correlations between special district area, a dichotomous variable, and other variables.

23. We compare the variable coefficients in the correlation matrix as well as regression models before and after imputation. The coefficients are quite similar, not affecting study conclusions, but the standard errors are generally larger in the regression models before imputation. Descriptive statistics before and after imputation are almost identical.

24. The fact that many survey items are stated as observable actions, policies, and strategies (see Data and Methods) does not mean that these are “hard” objective data, of course; they are survey items.

25. Very few of the special districts are multi-purpose; over 90% are single purpose. Another caveat is that this article focuses broadly on community commitment, district functions, human resource management, and organizational performance, rather than focusing in-depth on any one of these areas. This study is grounded in public administration and does not address typical concerns of political science such as voting, community politics, and so on.

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## APPENDIX: VARIABLE MEASUREMENT

### Dependent Variables: Community Commitment in Special Districts

Community Research (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .79$ )

- Staff commissions studies that help us better understand the needs of the community.
- Staff commissions studies that help us better understand the impact of proposed policies or programs on the community.

Community Involvement in Decision Making (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .62$ )

- We have both formal and informal discussions with business leaders.
- We have both formal and informal discussions with community leaders (not business).
- Senior managers reach out to elected officials in the community.

Community-Focused Board Interactions (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .80$ )

- We help the governing board to evaluate the impact of proposed policies or programs on different segments of the community.
- The executive director encourages board discussions about public participation.
- The executive director encourages board discussions about how we can best serve the community.

Community Development Orientation (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .78$ )

- We focus on helping the community move forward.
- We do a good job at preserving the strengths of the community.

Global Community Commitment (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .81$ )

### **Independent Variables: Antecedents of Community-Orientation in Special Districts**

Ethics Management (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .80$ )

- We have a code of ethics.
- We have a code of conduct.
- We have an active program to enforce ethics standards among managers and employees.
- We have extensive practices to provide openness and transparency in all our administrative decisions and practices.
- Unethical conducts are dealt with harshly.
- Our organization strongly promotes professional norms.

Community Interaction Positions (0 = No; 1 = Yes; KR20 = .76)

- Our organization has jobs whose main purpose is coordinating with other public agencies.
- Our organization has jobs whose main purpose is working with citizens and community leaders.

Charter (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*;  $\alpha = .84$ )

- The charter adequately specifies the role of managers in relation to the board.
- The charter adequately specifies the role of managers in promoting the public interest.

Qualifications (not combined)

- Percentage of senior management team with public administration degrees.
- Many professional jobs in our organization require a master's degree (7 = *Strongly Agree* to 1 = *Strongly Disagree*).

Organization Size: (log) number of full-time employees

Service type: Libraries, parks, health organizations, transportation authorities, ports, and airports = 1; others = 0

Board type: Elected board; appointed board; mixed board (three dummy variables)