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Public Values in Special Districts: A Survey of Managerial Commitment

Special districts are increasingly important in the landscape of public organizations and now constitute about 40 percent of all U.S. jurisdictions. Yet little is known about the public value commitments of managers in special districts. This systematic study of senior managers in large special districts finds that support for public values is strong and similar to that of senior managers in cities. This study explores the effect of concomitant commitments to "businesslike" values on public values and the impact of concomitant commitments on perceived organizational outcomes. Though a positive relationship exists between commitments to public and businesslike values among senior managers, the authors find evidence that both too much and too little commitment to businesslike values has a negative impact on perceived organizational outcomes, which are furthered by strong commitment to public values. This article demonstrates that special districts are a relevant but underresearched area of public administration.

Organizations that blend and blur traditional distinctions between public and private purpose, ownership, or control are increasingly common. Special districts have public as well as private characteristics and provide a vast range of services in transportation, housing, parks, health, water management, and business development, among others. Special districts are independent, special-purpose government jurisdictions[1] that now make up about 40 percent of public organizations in the United States and nearly equal the number of U.S. cities (about 35,000; see U.S. Census Bureau 2002).[2] Though severely underresearched, special districts have become a popular policy choice for delivering public services in efficient, "businesslike" ways. Yet their growing presence also has raised considerable concern. Critics often contend that special districts bend public purposes by being insufficiently committed to their communities and that they are unduly influenced by

special, private interests, notably business and contractor communities.[3] Private sector representatives often exercise disproportionate control over public decisions by serving on special district governing boards, and public control is diminished further by weak electoral and media scrutiny. While anecdotal, these concerns about a lack of consistent commitment to public purpose appear to be widely held (Bacot and Christine 2006; Barouth 2007; Beitsch 2005; Judd and Swanstrom 2008; Porter 1994; Skelcher 2007; Stephens and Wikstrom 1998).

Public managers in special districts are key to developing many policies and programs that bring public values to life, but at present, little is known about managers' efforts and value commitments in special districts. Indeed, we do not even know who these managers are, or how they see their role in safeguarding or furthering public values. This study contributes to the knowledge base of public administration by addressing two key research questions: (1) to what extent are managers of special districts committed to public values, and (2) what is the effect of concomitant commitment to businesslike values on managers' commitments to public values? In addition, this study examines factors that are associated with high levels of managerial commitment to public values. Systematic studies of special districts are scarce and do not address these matters (e.g., Figueredo 2005; Foster 1996, 1997; Marlow 1995; Nunn and Schoedel 1997).[4] This research is based on a national survey of senior managers in large special districts; the study methods and caveats are discussed in the methods section.

This research makes two important contributions. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship by exploring the "publicness" of organizational processes and outcomes. For example, neo-institutional frameworks focus on the relationship between

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public value institutions and realized "public" outcomes. Public values, as "the social construction of shared meanings," shape public service motivations and organizational processes and are thought by some to be "most predictive of complex organizational outcomes" (Moulton 2009, 894).[5] We need to know more about how public values shape outcomes; this study also shows how public managers reconcile public values to affect perceived outcomes when they are committed to other values concurrently. Second, this study contributes to building a foundation of systematic knowledge about special districts. The lack of systematic knowledge about special districts hinders theory generation by compromising the ability to formulate even the most basic assumptions on which theory must rest.[6] We need to know in what ways special district are similar and dissimilar from other forms of public organizations. While no study can address these encompassing matters fully, this article furthers understanding and contributes to the knowledge base of large special districts in public administration.[7]

The Relativity of Commitment

Studies of managerial values are extensive, to say the least, and a staple of public administration research. Values generally are defined as "judgments of worth" or preferences having "certain weight in the choice of action" that are enduring overtime (Davis 1998; Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins 2006; Pollock 1998; Van der Wal et al. 2006). Public values are identified as those that give government organizations their distinctive public purposes, such as commitment to accountability, openness, inclusiveness (stakeholder participation), equity, and the pursuit of community and public benefits (Antonsen and Beck Jørgensen 1997; Beck Jørgensen 2002, 2007; Boyne 2002; Bozeman 2002, 2007; Goodsell 1989, 1990, 1994; Van der Wal et al. 2006; West and Davis 2011).[8] Research shows that values are associated with behaviors such as choosing decision-making styles, weighing ethical considerations, achieving outcomes, and motivating the workforce. The latter has recently attracted considerable interest among scholars under the rubric of public service motivation (Alonso and Lewis 2001; Brewer, Selden, and Facer 2000; Conner and Becker 2003; Coursey et al. 2008; Perry 1996, 1997; Perry and Wise 1990; Wright and Pandey 2008).

While values undergird managerial action, the fundamentally abstract nature of the values concept has been a challenge to both research and practice. It is hard to identify another person's values, and indeed, sometimes even one's own. At issue are not only efforts to portray a positive public image, or even to disguise one's real aspirations, but also to recognize that people experience conflicting values in specific situations. In recent years, significant progress has been made in both management and scholarship. The concept of "commitment," defined as support for goals or values as evidenced by practice, increasingly is used. Commitment bridges the abstract notion of values and the empirical actions that support them. For example, commitment to "meeting the needs of citizens" is taken to include specific managerial actions that further (or "realize") this end. For instance, in job interviews, interviewees are asked to give examples of how their actual actions support specific goals or values, hence showing commitment. Commitment refers to a range of supportive actions rather than any one specific action. To know the extent of managerial commitment to public values is to know the extent of a range of actions that support some public value (Berman and West 2003; Hopkins, Hopkins, and Mallette 2001; Lamsa and Savolainen 2000).

This study furthers the discourse by examining commitment as an empirically measurable phenomenon that is relative in two key ways. First, people vary in their level of commitment. While many people are likely to agree that they are honest, far fewer are likely to agree that they always tell the truth. Importantly, empirical studies counter common misperceptions, among lay persons and experts alike, that officials are likely to give high or unrealistically inflated marks for their own commitments and those of their subordinates. This is not the case. For example, Berman and West (2003) find, using multivariable measures of commitment to performance and public participation, that senior managers in about 40 percent of cities with populations of more than 50,000 report good to excellent levels of commitment among the managers reporting to them (concerning practices related to accountability, citizen participation, and performance), 42 percent report a mediocre level, and 18 percent report a poor level. Boyne's (2002, 112–13) review of 14 empirical studies finds great variation in assessments of managerial values, in both the public and private sectors. Studies show that managers' self-reported levels of commitment, or their assessments of subordinates, vary and that they are not always "excellent" (see also Posner and Schmidt 1994, 1996).

Second, commitments to one area do not preclude commitments to other areas or values. For example, people can be committed to ethics but also simultaneously to their careers, families, happiness, and so forth. The mixed values of special districts sharply raise the issue of strong commitments to businesslike purposes and their impact on public values.[9] Special districts' considerable reliance on user fees causes a fundamental focus on revenue generation, program cost efficiency, and other businesslike values. A recurring challenge to managers in special districts is balancing and reconciling competing commitments. One concern is that strong commitment to public values may not always be enough to ensure public outcomes. While earlier experiences from total quality management, New Public Management, and the National Performance Review suggest that, generally, businesslike means and purposes can be put in service of furthering public goals (marketing programs, revenue maximization, and other businesslike efficiency strategies surely find use in special districts), scholars note that strong commitment to business values such as revenue maximization can result in reduced services to those who can least afford them (Bovens 1996; Bozeman 2002, 2007; Bozeman and Sarewitz 2005; Frederickson 1997, 2005; Lane 1994; Maesschalck 2004).

This study of managerial values in special districts examines four areas of commitment: (1) to furthering communities and involving their stakeholders, (2) to providing accountability in myriad ways, (3) to ensuring managerial effectiveness, and (4) to addressing businesslike objectives such as profitability and using strategies such as revenue maximization and market-based pricing. The first two areas are taken to be illustrative of public sector value commitments, and

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they also are mentioned in authoritative statements (e.g., ASPA and ICMA codes of ethics, corporate codes, bylaws in special districts). The fourth is related to business, and the third is thought to concern both. Measures of these commitments are available from previous studies in the literature and are discussed subsequently (Cavanaugh 2010; Lewis and Gilman 2005; Rowe and Hug 1998; Svara 2007).

Concerns about public commitment, such as those mentioned in the introduction, often focus on program outcomes, but the presence of these concerns does not necessarily imply weak or modest managerial commitment to public values. The foregoing suggests that concerns may stem from trade-offs with competing, and perhaps even stronger, businesslike values. The presence of strong businesslike values, including pressures to favor special interests, requires even stronger commitments to public values. Indeed, working in such an environment requires a strong commitment to public values. The presence of widespread concerns suggests that managerial commitment may not be as strong as it needs to be, while including the possibility of weak commitments, too. The purpose of this empirical research is to assess this situation.

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Distinctively, this study examines the possibility of a positive (complementary) relationship between strong public and businesslike values. It does so on the grounds that processes that further strong commitment to public values include mechanisms for reconciling and addressing commitments to other values. For example, modern professional management practices in public administration include concern for organizational mission and stakeholders' needs, which invites competing issues as well as processes of reconciliation that typically involve analysis, legal argument (e.g., authority), procedure (e.g., public hearings), and precedent. Processes for addressing competing values are well established in public administration. However, *the converse is not necessarily true* for businesslike frameworks. Business and engineering frameworks cannot always be broadened to accommodate, or even prioritize, public values; for example, "inclusiveness" is readily seen as a source of inefficiency. A strong commitment to businesslike values can crowd out public values when commitment to the latter is modest, further heightening critical concerns about special districts.

This study also explores factors that are associated with strong public value commitments in special districts. While, anecdotally, special district managers sometimes are seen to have business and engineering backgrounds, managers in many cities also have diverse professional and past employment backgrounds without necessarily causing a lack of or insufficient commitment to public purposes. While backgrounds may matter, this study also builds on nascent research advances suggesting that values articulation (e.g., ethics) combined with consequences strengthens value commitment (Berman and West 1997; Menzel 2007, 2010; Paarlberg and Perry 2007; West and Berman 2006). Beyond this, some service areas require managers to have frequent interactions with citizens and customers (e.g., parks and recreation), or to have strong social purposes (e.g., housing) that increase managerial awareness and possible commitment to public values. Other service areas that are capital or infrastructure intensive (e.g., utilities) and are closely aligned with business interests (e.g., economic development) might have managers with higher levels of commitment to efficiency, less contact with users, and weaker responsiveness to citizen needs. These and other factors affecting commitment to public values are further examined.

Methods

In the summer and fall of 2008, a mail survey of agency directors was undertaken among 485 large special districts in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau defines large special districts as those with annual revenues or expenditures of at least $10 million or debts exceeding $20 million. The sampling frame is selected from special districts with at least 75 employees (excluding hospitals)[10] so as to ensure that the sample included operating organizations and not merely financial pass-through services. The Census Bureau criteria of revenues or expenditures ensure that these organizations have substantial operational effort.

A pilot questionnaire and three rounds of follow-up mailings consisting of 256 items resulted in 217 completed responses, for a response rate of 44.7 percent. This is consistent with response rates reported in the literature; in fact, it is well above the lower range of 30 percent to 35 percent that sometimes is reported (e.g., Hays and Kearney 2001). We also conducted 20 in-depth interviews (approximately one hour each) with respondents, which provided context and also helped validate the mail survey responses.

By function, the special districts in the sample encompass sewage and water (20.5 percent), housing and community development (16.9 percent), public mass transit (13.3 percent), parks and recreation (13.3 percent), public health (7.2 percent), airports and seaports (6.2 percent), libraries (5.6 percent), fire (3.1 percent), and power utilities (2.1 percent). About 6.7 percent are multifunctional districts, and 5.1 percent engage in other functions such as the creation and maintenance of bridges and tunnels, parking, or highways. On average, the organizations report that they have 499 employees and use an additional 116 contractor employees in the delivery of their services.[11] Among respondents, 73.8 percent were completed by the addressee, the executive director of the special district. Most of the remainder (24.6 percent) were completed by others with titles such as director of administrative services, deputy executive director, chief of staff, vice president of operations, human resource director, and so on. Reflecting this diversity and experience, the survey group is referred to here as "senior managers."

On average, respondents have worked 16.9 years in their present organization. In all, 92.7 percent state that they are very familiar with the performance of their jurisdiction, and 98.4 percent are familiar or very familiar with the performance of managers in their organization.[12] Among the respondents, 59.3 percent have a master's degree, and 33.6 percent have a bachelor's degree. About one-quarter (27.6 percent) report that their highest degree is in public administration, urban planning, or political science. The remainder report degrees in business administration, including finance, accounting, and human resource management (32.0 percent); engineering (11.2 percent); psychology, counseling, and social work (6.0 percent); law (3.6 percent); and other fields such as library science, geology, or history.

Among the respondents, 79.2 percent are male; 11.9 percent are younger than 45, 29.5 percent are 45–54 years old, and 58.5 percent are over 54 years of age.

Validity is an important study concern. We did not ask about respondents' own commitment, but rather about the commitment of other managers and supervisors in the organization. We avoided asking about other managers' internal psychological processes, but sought respondents' assessment (perception) of matters that could be observed empirically, and about which respondents were likely to be familiar as a result of their job duties. We pilot-tested the survey and asked whether questions were clear and unambiguous.

Triangulation is used to assess construct validity through survey items stated as observable actions, policies, strategies. Sample bias is examined by comparing the responses of respondents by title, addressees, length of service in their jurisdiction, familiarity with the performance of their organization, age, and gender. While a few differences exist, they are relatively minor and do not significantly affect our results, and none is associated with public value commitment. We also find no significant differences between early and late mail survey respondents regarding perceptions of commitments. Finally, notwithstanding our relatively high response rate of 44.7 percent, we also conducted a survey of 35 nonrespondents to examine for possible bias among those who responded. Based on ten items randomly selected from our survey, we conclude that the differences are small and do not materially affect the findings presented here.[13] The results also are compared against identical and similar items used in surveys of local governments.

All studies have caveats and limitations. First, we assess the opinions of top managers rather than those of lower-level managers, employees, or community leaders, who may hold different views about the commitments of public managers. Top managers are selected because they are often well informed and because their views influence jurisdictional policies. Second, this article focuses broadly on interactions with other agencies, community leaders, and citizen participation, rather than focusing in depth on any one of these areas. Third, our measures of managerial commitments are necessarily subjective, as no "hard," objective data exist about the topics under discussion. Despite considerable precautions to identify and minimize measurement errors, no subjective data are free from the possibility of some distortion and measurement error. Measurement imperfections are embedded in the study of levels of commitment to values, as well as in human and organizational experiences that accompany them.[14] Fourth, no study can assess all public or private values; quite obviously, choices must be made, as discussed earlier. This study focuses on values that are relevant to the many concerns about special districts.[15] The results section focuses on the two key research questions of this study. The first part assesses the extent to which managers of special districts are committed to public values. It examines variation in public values commitment and compares these findings of public values commitment against similar survey items involving cities. The second part of the analysis assesses commitment to businesslike values and how commitment to public values affect trade-offs with businesslike values and perceived outcomes. The results section examines factors associated with managerial commitment to public values.

Results
Commitment to Public Values

Table 1 reports the perceived commitment to public values among senior managers and supervisors of special districts. Part A shows commitment to developing communities. Among respondents, 46.3 percent report that meeting the needs of citizens is very important, and 44.6 percent state that serving all citizens is very important. One-third (32.9 percent) indicate that working with public leaders is very important, and about one-quarter (27.2 percent) state that working with community leaders is very important, in addition to 26.2 percent who believe that "helping the community move forward" is very important. When additional responses of "important"

Table 1 Commitment to Public Values in Special Districts

How important are the following to managers and supervisors in your organization?

Commitment to …	Very Important (5)	Important (4)	Somewhat Important (3)	Unimportant (2)	Can't Say[a] (1)
A. Developing Communities					
Meeting the needs of citizens	46.3	29.0	4.2	5.1	5.4
Serving all citizens	44.6	21.1	11.3	12.7	10.3
Working with public leaders	32.9	30.0	17.8	9.9	9.4
Working with community leaders	27.2	35.2	19.2	7.5	10.8
Helping the community move forward	26.6	35.0	19.6	8.4	10.3
Citizen participation in decision making	13.2	28.3	38.7	15.1	4.7
B. Accountability					
Ethical behavior and conduct	68.7	9.8	1.9	4.7	15.0
Accountability to the governing board	64.0	13.6	2.8	2.8	16.8
Legal compliance	59.3	18.7	2.3	4.2	15.4
Avoiding conflict of interest	57.0	18.2	5.6	5.1	14.0
Financial viability	46.7	29.2	3.8	5.7	14.6
Protecting confidentiality	43.9	26.6	8.4	8.9	12.1
Providing openness and transparency	40.4	30.5	10.3	7.5	11.3
C. Managerial Effectiveness					
Efficient use of resources	54.0	22.5	3.8	8.0	11.7
Innovation	28.2	34.7	19.2	8.9	8.9
Management flexibility	23.5	43.7	13.1	13.6	6.1
Balancing risk with reward	14.2	42.0	22.6	13.2	8.0
D. Businesslike Values					
Cutting costs (economy)	28.6	37.1	14.6	11.3	8.5
Revenue maximization	25.4	27.7	22.1	16.9	8.0
Profitability	12.7	19.8	19.3	23.6	24.5
Market pricing	10.9	22.3	26.5	20.9	19.4

[a] Includes "Not appropriate."

Note: Cronbach's alpha scores of index variables are 0.83 (developing communities), 0.86 (accountability), 0.82 (managerial effectiveness). and 0.82 (businesslike). Index variable "public values" (developing communities, accountability, managerial effectiveness) is 0.85.

are included, table 1 shows that responses to these items are in the 60 percent to 75 percent range, suggesting considerable commitment. Further analysis also indicates that among respondents, 43.1 percent say that managers' commitment to each of these five items is either important or very important, and 59.3 percent say so for at least four of these five items. Table 1 also shows considerably less commitment to citizen participation—only 13.2 percent of respondents report that this is very important to managers and supervisors in their special districts. The classification of items in table 1 is based on factor analysis reported in the accompanying footnote.[16]

These findings support, as mentioned in the framework, that officials do not give unrealistically inflated marks for commitments of their subordinates. Table 1, part B, also shows commitment to values of accountability that are higher than those for developing community. Among respondents, more than two-thirds (68.7 percent) report that ethical behavior is very important, and 64.0 percent of respondents regard accountability to the governing board as very important. Nearly six in ten believe that legal compliance and avoiding conflict of interest are very important (59.3 percent and 57.0 percent, respectively). Strong commitment also is shown on other items such as ensuring openness and transparency and confidentiality. When "important" responses are included, too, then measures of commitment are in the 70 percent to 80 percent range for each of the items in part B. Additional analysis shows that a majority (58.3 percent) of respondents believe that managers' commitment to each of these seven items is either important or very important, and three-fourths (75.5 percent) agree with at least five of these items in this way. The means of the index measures of commitment to community development and accountability are 4.1 and 4.6, respectively. The first is statistically the same as "important," and the latter is statistically greater.[17] These results stand in contrast to some generally held concerns about special districts, noted in the introduction.[18]

Triangulation supports these findings. For example, in a separate question, 13.0 percent of respondents strongly agree and an additional 29.8 percent agree that "managers in their organization involve many sectors of the community in most major policy decisions." This measure is significantly associated with the items in part A, such as citizen participation (tau-b = .274, $p < .01$). Beyond this, the items relating to "developing communities" (part A) and "accountability" (part B) readily are aggregated into separate index variables ($\alpha = 0.83$ and 0.86, respectively); the foregoing item is statistically associated with these two index variables as well (tau-c = .271 and .165, respectively, both $p < .01$). Another item, "staff commissions studies to help us better understand the impact of proposed policies and programs," also is associated with these index variables (tau-c = .223 and .191, respectively, both $p < .01$).[19] Regarding validity, we examine whether values commitment is associated with various respondent characteristics, but find no such association such as with gender, age, degree, title, length of experience with the organization, or self-assessed familiarity with managerial or organizational performance.

However, the foregoing reflect averages, and there is variation in commitment. Based on the index measures, one in five (19.5 percent) respondents state that managers and supervisors in their special districts are only somewhat committed to community development. Commitment to accountability is stronger, and only 5.6 percent of respondents state that they are somewhat committed to accountability. Special districts scoring on either of these measures are labeled as having a weak to moderate commitment to public values, as being weak in either of these areas is hardly evidence of strong commitment. Conversely, those whose commitment is rated as very important on both are classified as having very strong managerial commitments. Based on this, one-fifth (22.3 percent) of special districts are classified as having managers and supervisors with a weak or moderate commitment to public values (a few special districts are rated low on both measures), a bare majority (52.0 percent) as having a strong commitment to public values, and one-quarter (25.7 percent) as having a very strong commitment to public values. It is important to note that this distribution is based on substantive considerations, and not on the arithmetic frequency distributions of an index, for example.[20]

This variation in commitment is not readily explained by managerial backgrounds or broad characteristics of special districts. According to respondents, on average, 9.5 managers constitute the senior management teams of large special districts.[21] Among these, one-fifth (21.4 percent) of the managers on senior management teams have degrees in public affairs (public administration, political science, public policy, or law; about one-third of these, or 7.5 percent, have master of public administration degrees),[22] less than one-fourth (23.6 percent) have degrees in business administration, 15.9 percent have degrees in engineering, and one-third (33.7 percent) reported "other" fields. A majority (53.9 percent) have an undergraduate degree as their highest degree, 42.8 percent have a graduate degree, and 3.3 percent have a doctoral degree. The differences in managerial commitment to public values and managerial academic background are not statistically significant. For example, less than one-quarter (23.9 percent) of management teams with very high commitment to public values have managers with public affairs degrees compared with 16.3 percent of management teams with strong commitment, but one-fourth (25.6 percent) of teams with weak or moderate commitment. Clearly, public affairs degrees alone do not predict managers' public values commitment. Neither special district size (number of employees) nor service area is related to commitment to public service values.

Comparison with Cities

Table 2 compares results from special districts with those from previous surveys of senior managers in U.S. cities (see footnotes in table); our survey includes items to allow for this comparison.[23] The results in table 2 show somewhat similar perceptions of commitment to citizen and community involvement by senior managers in special districts and cities, although cities have somewhat greater commitment to citizen participation. In addition, in a separate question, two-thirds (67.8 percent) of special district respondents agree or strongly agree that they "have both formal and informal discussions with community leaders," compared to a bare majority (50.3 percent) of municipal respondents who agree or strongly agree that "in our city most managers hold regular discussions with community leaders on city problems." Table 2 also shows commitments to ethics and accountability. Again, cities and special districts are quite similar, but special districts more often have a code of conduct (86.0 percent versus 67.0 percent), and they more often

Table 2 Comparing Commitments in Special Districts and Cities

	Special Districts	Cities
	Mean	
Citizen Orientation		
We have a strong customer orientation[a]	6.03	5.99
Collaboration with community leaders is good[a]	5.91	5.88
Citizen participation in decision making[c]	5.46	5.62*
Ethics/Accountability		
We have a code of conduct[a]	6.22	5.55**
Unethical conduct is dealt with harshly[a]	5.75	5.74
Managers set high standards of ethics for themselves[b]	5.87	5.74*
Personally embrace professional standards[b]	5.87	5.83
Avoid conflict of interest[c]	6.48	5.75**
Managerial Effectiveness		
We frequently develop new, innovative programs[a]	5.72	5.54
We use up-to-date information technology applications[a]	5.85	5.50**
We link managerial evaluation to agency results[a]	5.25	4.91**
Organizational productivity is high[a]	5.71	5.53*
Managers exhibit a lot of personal drive[b]	5.61	5.44*
Managers are committed to improving efficiency and effectiveness[b]	5.78	5.60*

[a] National Survey of Public Administration: Local Government: 2006, results analyzed from original data collected by the authors (see Berman and West 2008). Scale: 7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

[b] National Survey of Public Administration: Local Government: 2003, results analyzed from original data collected by the authors (see Berman and West 2003). Scale: 7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

[c] Recode of 2009 survey items in table 1 as 7 = strongly agree (very important); 6 = agree (important); 5 = somewhat agree (somewhat important); 4 = can't say; 3 = somewhat to strongly disagree (unimportant).

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ (Kendall's tau-c and Mann-Whitney tests).

agree that they seek to avoid conflict of interests. The latter finding undoubtedly reflects the close relations with business that often are mentioned. By and large, the findings in table 2 suggest quite *similar levels of commitment to public values* with these modest, "context-dependent" variations.[24]

Tables 1 and 2 also show commitment to managerial effectiveness, which, as mentioned in the framework, is thought to characterize both public and businesslike values. Table 1 shows high commitment to the efficient use of resources (54.0 percent of respondents stated that managers in their special districts regard this as very important), and 28.2 percent also regard commitment to innovation as very important. Commitment to managerial effectiveness is as strong as commitment to community development (index means 4.07 and 4.08). Table 2 further shows that special district respondents perceive greater commitment to values of managerial effectiveness. They also perceive a higher level of outcomes. Additional analysis shows that special districts in business and infrastructure areas, more strongly agree that they use up-to-date information technology applications and that they have higher organizational productivity than those in social, recreational, and other areas.[25]

Trade-Offs with Businesslike Values

The second research objective is to determine how commitment to public values affects trade-offs with businesslike values. Commitment to businesslike values is shown in table 1, part D. Among respondents, more than one-quarter (28.6 percent) report that commitment to cutting costs is very important to managers and supervisors, and 25.4 percent state that commitment to revenue maximization is very important. When additional responses of "important"

Table 3 Distribution of Public and Businesslike Commitment

		Businesslike Commitment			
		Weak/Moderate	High	Very High	*Total*
Commitment to Public Values	Weak/Moderate	14.3	6.9	1.1	22.3
	High	18.9	26.3	6.9	52.0
	Very High	4.6	7.4	13.7	25.7
Total		37.7	40.6	21.7	100%

Note: tau-c =.374, $p < .01$, $n = 175$.

Table 4 Association of Public and Businesslike Commitments in Special Districts

|	Mean	Std Dev.	Dev. Comm.	Account.	Mgr Effect	Business Values
Developing Communities	4.08	.63	1			
Accountability	4.58	.48	.434**	1		
Managerial Effectiveness	4.07	.68	.567**	.663**	1	
Businesslike Values	3.61	.83	.515**	.394**	.690**	1

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients shown.
** $p < .01$.

are included, then responses to the items are, 65.7 percent and 53.1 percent, respectively, suggesting that these values are indeed important to more than half of special districts. Also, about one in ten respondents report that profitability and market pricing are very important (12.7 percent and 10.9 percent, respectively), and about one-third state that these are important or very important (32.5 percent and 33.2 percent, respectively). Analysis shows that among respondents, one-third (34.3 percent) state that managers' commitment to at least three of these four items is important or very important. An index of businesslike values was constructed ($\alpha = 0.82$), and on average, commitment is barely important at 3.61.[26]
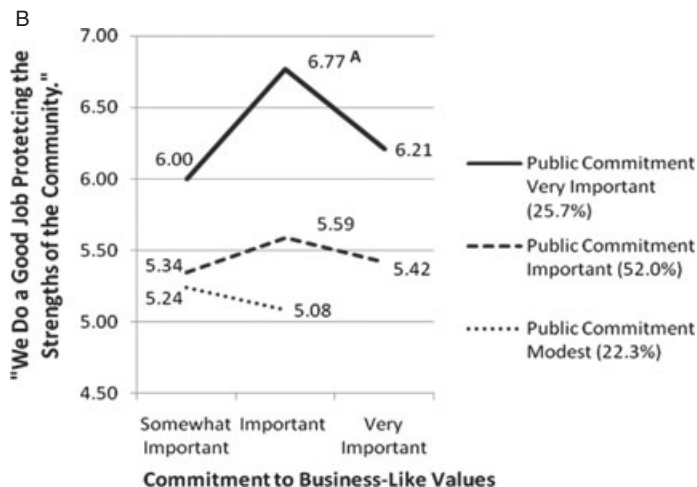
Table 3 shows the relationship between commitment to public and businesslike values. Using the foregoing categorization, a majority (54.3 percent) of special districts have a strong managerial commitment to both public and businesslike values, more than one-third (37.7 percent) of special districts have weak to moderate levels of businesslike commitment, and only 8.0 percent of special districts have weak or moderate levels of managerial commitment to public values with high or very high level of commitment to businesslike values. But the last—a very high commitment to business values with concomitant modest or weak commitment to public values—is rare (1.1 percent), and it is supported by further sensitivity (what-if) analysis.[27] On average, a positive (*complementary*) relationship is found between public and businesslike values (tau-c = .374, $p < .01$). Table 4 further supports this, finding positive relations among each of the index measures.[28] This finding is important, showing that commitment to public and businesslike values is not necessarily exclusive. It also implies that trade-off (reconciliation) is needed when commitment to both public and businesslike values is strong and when these values conflict.

Figure 1 (A–D) shows these trade-offs for different levels of commitment, further specifying this relationship. It shows the impact of commitment to public and businesslike values on four outcome measures: (1) perceptions of innovation, (2) preserving the strengths of community, (3) financial performance, and (4) an index of

A
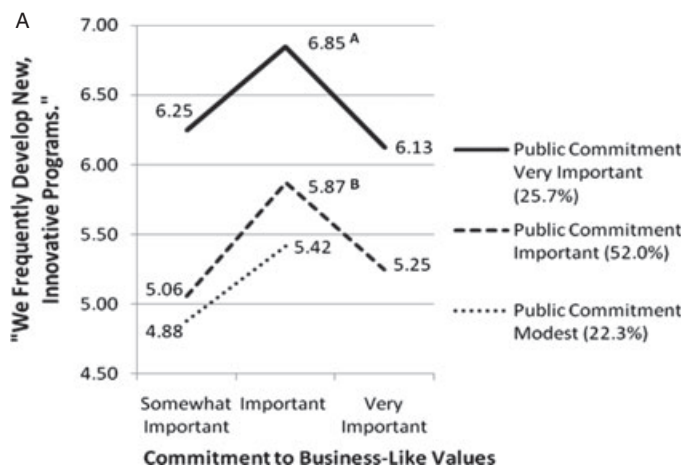
Note: Because of the scarcity of situations (0.9 percent, see table 3), data points of special districts with modest commitment to public values and very high level of commitment to businesslike values are omitted.
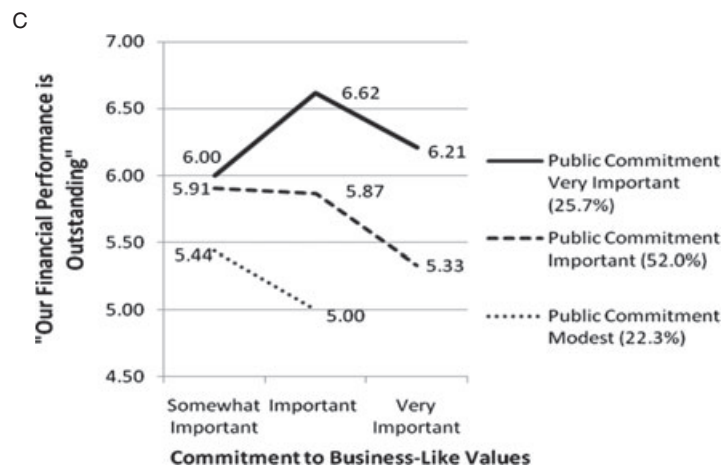
a. The difference between 6.85 and the lower perceptions of 6.13 and 6.25 is significant (tau-c = .407, $p < .01$).

b. The difference between 5.87 and the lower perceptions of 5.06 and 5.25 is significant (tau-c = .300, $p < .01$).

C

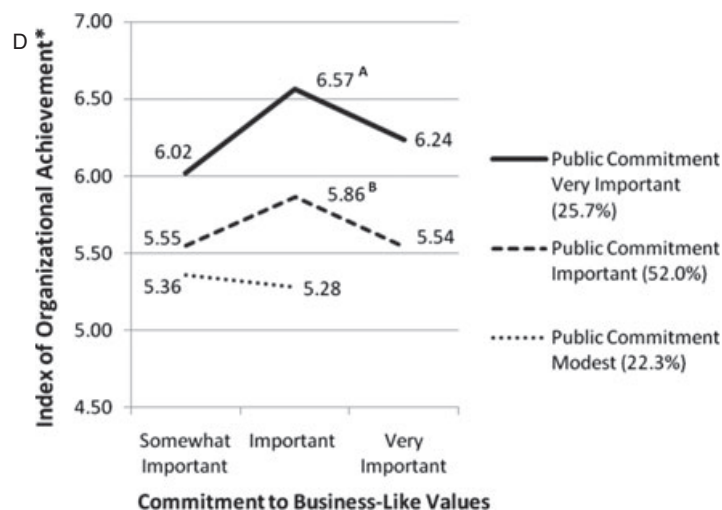Note: The difference between 6.22 and the lower values 6.00 and 6.21 is nearly significant at conventional levels (tau = .212, $p < .10$). Still, the pattern is clear, and this figure shows a variation of the previous ones.

B

a. The difference between 6.77 and the lower perceptions of 6.00 and 6.21 is significant (tau-c = .263, $p < .05$).

D

Note: See note 28 for a description of the index.

a. The difference between 6.57 and the lower perceptions of 6.02 and 6.24 is significant (tau = .398, $p < .01$).

b. The difference between 5.86 and the lower perceptions of 5.55 and 5.54 is significant (tau = .283, $p < .05$).

Figure 1 Impact of Commitment

organizational achievement described in the accompanying foot-note.[29] These measures address matters of performance, community orientation, and financial viability, respectively, which are central concerns. Survey items are shown in figure 1. These figures support two important conclusions. First, there is an optimum level of managerial commitment to businesslike values. The Λ-shape (inverted V) pattern shows that outcomes often are highest when managerial commitment to businesslike values is important, and that outcomes are reduced when managers have either too much (very important) or too little (somewhat important) commitment to these values. For example, the difference in figure 1A between 6.85 (on the solid line) and the lower perceptions of innovation, 6.13 and 6.25, is statistically significant (tau-c = .407, $p < .01$).[30] The other figures make much the same point. Too much commitment to, say, cutting costs or revenue maximization reduces attention to developing new

programs or protecting the strengths of communities, but too little attention to these matters also affects such programs. Interviews show these challenges:

> When there is a conflict between private and public values you go back to the mission. Our values are spelled out in our governance manual. We exist to provide the best facilities and service to the community—to meet the community's expectations. We also try to cut expenses as a business would do. If we were a business, we would remove our housekeeping staff. Well-meaning business people on our board think we should do so to help the bottom line, but we are not willing to compromise on the quality of the service we provide. Our commissioners want us to pick up revenues any way we can [but] this is secondary to our public values mission.

But also,

> There is a new mind-set now. We used to hire young professionals who were committed to "feel good," sentimental values, now we are a business and we need to operate as such with economic concerns in the forefront. We are now thinking about cost recovery, cost cutting, the bottom line focusing on the program, not the people.

and,

> We had to make a business decision to eliminate all sponsorships. For example, we no longer subsidize kids to go to the Shriner's circus or sponsor golf tournaments. Here, public values suffered. Some in the community could not understand this decision. These sponsorships had been good for the community, but times are tough now.

Second, and perhaps even more important, figure 1 shows that commitment to public values matters greatly; perceptions of excellent performance are associated with perceptions of excellent levels of commitment to public values. This is shown by the solid lines in each of the graphs. Managerial commitment to public values increases perceptions of performance outcomes at almost all levels. A practical insight from these figures is that among those with high but not very high commitment to public values, the problem of very high commitment to businesslike values is better addressed by raising commitment to public values than by lowering commitment to businesslike values.[31] The need for an assertive approach to strong public values commitment is articulated by the director of a special park district:

> The board is mostly made up of people who run small businesses. Their point of reference is the business they operate. It becomes the manager's job to articulate public values. This sometimes means butting heads between me and the board or among board members themselves.

Other interviewees make similar statements about articulating public values in dealing with subordinates or in cultivating a public service organizational culture when people confront or question the need for public purposes. Figure 1 shows the importance of special district managers who consider their commitment to public values to be *very important.*

Association of High Public Values Commitment and Outcomes

While high levels of commitment of public values are important, the systematic results of this study show that only one-fourth (25.7 percent) of respondents state that managers in their special districts have very high commitment to public values (very important). Hence, this study also analyzes results associated with *very high levels* of managerial commitment. Table 5 examines a range of factors discussed earlier in the framework, and the statistics show differences between very important and important levels of commitment to public values (by excluding instances of lesser commitment, it is a more stringent test). Findings show that very high commitment to public values is associated with managers hav-

[B]oth too much and too little commitment to businesslike values has a negative impact....

Table 5 Factors Affecting Very Strong Managerial Commitment to Public Values in Special Districts

Managers in special districts have greater commitment to public values when…

	Association[a]
A. Management Practices and Orientations	
1. "It is appropriate for managers to suggest new programs that move our community forward"	.304**
2. "We help the governing board to evaluate the impact of proposed policies and programs"	.258**
3. "Staff commissions studies that help us better understand the impact of proposed programs on the community."	.201*
4. "It's not a manager's job to make policy"	−.201*
5. "Senior managers reach out to elected officials in the community"	.238**
6. "Our organization strongly promotes professional norms"	.169*
7. "Managers set high standards of ethics for themselves"	.196*
B. Background, Policies and Contexts	
1. "Our policies make it difficult to fire people"	−.294**
2. "We have a code of ethics"	.209**
3. "We link managerial evaluation to agency results"	.228**
4. Senior management teams have managers with public affairs grad. degrees	.158
5. Special districts serve social rather and infrastructure needs	.089
6. "The charter specifies the role of managers in promoting the public interest"	.055
7. Number of employees (size)	.022

[a] Tau-c values shown.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

ing (1) positive views about actively suggesting new programs and working with the board and the community in developing them, (2) policies and practices that promote professional norms and ethics, and (3) policies that link managerial evaluation to results. This study does not find evidence of size, charter, or functional area being associated with very high commitment to public values.

Finally, table 6 shows a more stringent test of some of these results using regression. The model of public values (shown as A) supports these findings, though the modest (albeit acceptable) R^2 value of .25 also suggests that it is not easy to accurately predict managerial value commitments. Other factors, unexamined in this exploratory study, likely affect the value commitments, too. The model of perceived outcomes (shown as B) predicts innovation and productivity (see table for definition). This also supports the above findings, showing that, on average, management commitments to public and businesslike values affect increased perceived outcomes. These effects are significant even when controlling for linking managerial evaluation to results and perceptions of setting high standards for ethics, which are also significant.

Conclusions

This study finds that managerial commitment to public values is strong—about as strong as that among managers in cities, despite concern about special districts being overly responsive to and influenced by business and other private interests. This study also finds evidence of a generally positive relationship between commitments to public and businesslike values. Perceived outcomes are furthered by very high commitment to public values, although both too much and too little commitment to businesslike values has a negative impact on perceived outcomes. Study results also show considerable variation in managerial commitment

Table 6 Regression Models

Dependent Variable	A Commitment to Public Values	B Innovation & Productivity[a]
	Reg. Coeff. (t-statistic)	Reg. Coeff. (t-statistic)
Constant	5.27** (23.22)	3.71** (4.38)
Commitment to public values	—	.918* (2.43)
Commitment to businesslike values	—	.450* (1.98)
Interaction term (public values) * (businesslike values)	—	.189 (1.86)
Link managerial evaluation to agency results	.074** (2.84)	.281** (6.85)
Charter specifies role of managers furthering public values	.020 (1.09)	.045 (1.34)
Managers set high standards of ethics	.102** (3.09)	.155** (2.70)
We often talk about public service as a key value in what we do	.112** (3.47)	0.34 (.513)
Our policies make it difficult to fire people	.016 (.812)	−.044 (−1.38)
Public affairs degree	.042 (1.16)	.417 (1.39)
Functional area[b]	−.124 (−.148)	.276* (2.41)
Size	.000 (.151)	.000 (.354)
N =	134	134
Adjusted R^2	.25	.43

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

[a] Dependent variable is an index variable of three items (alpha = 0.71): "we frequently develop innovative programs," "we use up-to-date information technology applications," and "organizational productivity is high."

[b] 1 = Social policy or strong customer or citizen interaction; 2 = infrastructure intensive or business development.

to public values. Among senior managers in special districts, strong managerial commitment to public values is associated with orientations and practices that involve discussion of public service values and ethics and with linking managerial evaluation to agency results.

This study contributes to the discipline by providing foundation-laying knowledge of special districts and the relative nature of value commitments. Despite the growing role of special districts in the landscape of U.S. public organizations, little systematic research exists on them. Our study is limited, of course, and our findings cannot be generalized to all special districts. However, this survey indicates that, for this sample, special district officials seem to have a greater public orientation than might be expected. That these public organizations remain public is a valuable finding.[32] We believe that future research can regard managers in special districts as appropriately inspired by public values, and thus can focus in greater detail on other matters of interest. Special districts, and the means they employ to pursue their goals, are of growing importance and deserve greater attention on the part of managers and researchers alike.

Notes

1. For census purposes, the term "special district governments" excludes school district governments (U.S. Census Bureau 2002, vi). The U.S. Census Bureau notes that its classification of special district governments covers a wide variety of entities, most of which officially are called "districts" or "authorities." Not all public agencies so termed, however, represent separate governments. Many entities that carry the designation "district" or "authority" are, by law, so closely related to county, municipal, town or township, or state governments that they are classified as subordinate agencies of those governments in census statistics on governments, and they are not counted as separate special district governments. To be classified as a subordinate agency, an entity must possess three attributes: existence as an organized entity, governmental character, and substantial autonomy. Each of these attributes has multiple requirements that, in effect, require judgment. Scholars sometimes use their own definition, such as having "financial reach, tax exempt status, and quasi-monopolistic service delivery advantages of government together with political isolation, management flexibility, and financial discretion of private corporations" (Turk 2004, 20; Foster 1997, 4), but we follow that of the U.S. Census Bureau.

2. Specifically, there are 35,356 special districts and 35,937 municipalities and townships according to the 2002 Census. This is up from 20 percent of government units in the 1970s and 10 percent in the 1950s (12,340 in 1952).

3. This concern was mentioned by an anonymous reviewer, who stated that "should public values fall victim to private (orientations), i.e., 'go private,' then special districts would essentially be public organizations in sheep's clothing, i.e., these organizations would be private organizations except for their origin (charter), or funding (if any)."

4. Only few systematic studies exist that that deal with other matters such as board membership and public spending impacts.

5. Hybrid organizations or quasi-governments have captured the interest of scholars of international comparative politics, as well as those focusing on U.S. domestic politics and management (Flinders and Smith 1999; Koppell 2003; OECD 2002). Regardless of the scope of such research, a central focus is the extent to which the public interest is protected with respect to the interests of private parties. Special districts are public organizations but also raise these questions about commitment to their public and fundamental purposes.

6. For example, if managerial public value commitments are weak, then attention is drawn to hypothesizing how this affects outcomes in their environment. If managerial value commitments are not problematic, then we can attempt to bring special districts into the fold of what already is known about public organizations.

7. This study is also relevant to practice. About one-sixth of local government employees work for special districts. While cities still employ about five times as many people as special districts (3.4 million versus 721,000 full-time equivalent employees in 2002; see U.S. Census Bureau 2004), during the last 30 years, employment growth in special districts has been almost four times that of cities (116 percent versus 30 percent). The difference in employment numbers reflects the fact that most (91 percent) special districts are single-purpose governments that provide fewer services than general-purpose governments (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

8. An abbreviated list includes openness/transparency, accountability, incorruptibility, honesty, lawfulness, public interest, impartiality, and community service (Kernaghan 2003; Posner and Schmidt 1996; Schreurs 2005; Van der Wall and Huberts 2008; Van Wart 1998).

9. We use the term "businesslike" rather than "private" because commitment to "private" may conjure up images of corruption and other private takings, which are not of focal concern here.

10. Hospitals are excluded because individual patient health care may not be foremost affected by the community values explored here. Even though some public hospitals also have broad, community-based public health roles, these are a fraction of their total operations. This study does include organizations whose primary focus is public health.

11. The median number of employees is 250 and the maximum is 6,973. The figures for contractor employees are 25 and 2,500, respectively.

12. Respectively, 92.7 percent are very familiar and 6.7 percent are familiar with the performance of their organizations; 81.0 percent are very familiar and 17.5 percent are familiar with the performance of the managers in their organization.

13. For example, respondents and nonrespondents do not differ by whether they are the organization's executive director (73.8 percent versus 70.6 percent, $p > .05$), or by how many years they have worked in their organization (16.9 versus 15.1 years, $p > .05$). Nor do they vary in their perceptions of the importance of accountability to the governing board (very important or important, 77.6 percent versus 80.0 percent, $p > .05$) or helping the board assess the impact of program and policies and segment of the community (strongly agree or agree, 91.0 percent versus 94.3 percent, $p > .05$). There are no statistically significant differences as to whether directors and managers regularly articulate matters of public interest (agree or strongly agree, 84.1 percent versus 94.5 percent, $p > .05$).

14. A reviewer asked whether adequate certainty exists that orientation toward "public values" means the same to researchers and all of the survey participants. While "public values" surely is an abstract concept, we follow customary practice by operationalizing through terms that increase certainty about shared meanings. The items shown in tables 1 and 2 all involve terms with which senior managers, based on their job and experience, are expected be familiar and clear. Terms such as "working with community leaders," "ethical behavior," "protecting confidentiality," "revenue maximization," "conflict of interest," and so on, are all part of the daily lexicon of senior managers. We did not directly ask about "public values," which, indeed, could give rise to the foregoing problem. The pilot-testing of the survey did not reveal any problems with terms being unclear or having ambiguous meanings.

15. There is a point that, beyond the foregoing, some measure of uncertainty about any data needs to be taken. A reviewer asked, "The question 'how do we know that the respondents answered accurately or as they thought they should respond?' can only be answered through the above procedures." Surely, some respondents may have been less than truthful in their responses, but the foregoing makes it seem very unlikely that such biases exist to a degree that they invalidate the survey findings. Survey research is a well-tested scientific methodology, and we believe that we have taken extensive, customary precautions. Beyond this, we provide caveats and discuss triangulation in the results section. As is also customary scientific practice, future research by others may validate our findings.

16. The classification in table 1 is consistent with both reliability analysis and factor analysis. A factor analysis was performed (principal components with varimax rotation) in which four factors, corresponding to the foregoing variables, explain 64.3 percent of total variance. The loading on the factors for the items of "*developing communities*" are .646, .737, .807, .718, and .699; for "*accountability*" .743, .512, .701, .680, .763, .453, respectively. The item "serving all citizens" loads (scores) as a separate factor, which is readily explained by some special districts focusing on users rather than all citizens. Including this item in table 1 is theoretically appropriate for the construct of developing communities, scantly decreases the Cronbach's alpha from 0.84 to 0.83, and does not alter results in any significant way. The item "providing openness and transparency" also loads .593 on the "managerial effectiveness," consistent with modern theories of managerial effectiveness, but classifying this item as part of accountability is both theoretically appropriate for the construct of "accountability" and also empirically justified given the factor loading. It, too, does not alter later results in any significant way. The Cronbach's alpha scores in table 1 are all above .70; the reported scores exclude the "can't say" category and thus are stringent estimates of such scores).

17. The respective *t*-tests of the reported results against the value of 4.0 are $t = 1.58$ (n.s.) and $t = 15.9$ ($p < .01$).

18. Table 1 also shows a substantial and consistent number of "can't say" responses, which are often higher than for other items in table 1. Perhaps some jurisdictions do not always articulate these accountability expectations well.

19. Likewise, commitment to "accountability" is associated with having "an active program to enforce ethics standards among managers and employees" (tau-c = .228, $p < .01$).

20. Following Berman and West (2003), we classify special districts according to the strength of their commitments. Here we use the following index scale ranges (values as shown in table 1): below 3.5, modest or weak; 3.5–4.49, strong; and 4.5–5.0, very strong. The analysis excludes "don't know" responses. Redefining these ranges modestly changes the estimates of commitment in the text, but most reasonable redefinitions yield estimates within 10 percent of those in the text.

21. The median is eight managers, and 90 percent of special districts report up to 14 senior managers.

22. Analysis also shows that 38.3 percent of special districts have at least one senior manager on their management team who has a master of public administration degree, while 67 percent have at least one senior manager on their management team who has a public administration, political science, or public policy degree.

23. It might be noted that the theorem of the interchangeability of indicators states that if several different indicators all represent, to some degree, the same concept, then any combination of indicators will behave in much the same way as if the concept could be directly observed. In short, to assess broad similarity, any set of indicators need not be exhaustive or shown to be the "best" of such sets.

24. An obvious caveat is that data on the commitment of cities to their communities are absent, as such commitment usually is assumed and not researched.

25. Information technology applications, 6.13 versus 5.66 ($t = 3.09$, $p < .001$) and organizational productivity, 5.93 versus 5.57 ($t = 2.57$, $p < .01$), respectively.

26. The means of commitment to community development and accountability are 4.08 and 4.58, respectively.

27. The reported table is a stringent analysis of the relationship. For example, it excludes cases in which any of the items are missing. When scale means are calculated allowing for up to two missing items per observation, the share of such rare cases is still only 1.5 percent. Even using more generous definitions of "very high" commitment seldom increases this number to more than 3 percent.

28. The Pearson correlation coefficient of the relationship between the index of "public values" and "businesslike values" is $r = .510$ ($p < .01$).

29. The index (alpha = 0.71) is composed of these items: "we frequently develop innovative programs," "we use up-to-date IT applications," "we focus on helping the community move forward," "collaboration with community leaders is good," "organizational productivity is high," and "we do a good job preserving the strengths of the community."

30. The levels of significance are shown in figure 1 (A–D).

31. For example, this is shown in figure 1A, in which going from 4.25 to 5.13 is a larger improvement than going from 4.25 back to 4.59.

32. Comment from an anonymous reviewer.

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