

Essays on  
Citizen  
Participation  
and Governance

**Tanya Heikkila**  
**Kimberley Roussin Isett**  
Columbia University

## Citizen Involvement and Performance Management in Special-Purpose Governments

Provided for non-commercial research and education use.  
Not for reproduction, distribution or commercial use.

**Tanya Heikkila** is an assistant professor of public affairs at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. Her research interests are comparative institutional analysis and performance, with a focus on natural resource management institutions. She holds a PhD in management from the University of Arizona's School of Public Administration and Policy.  
**E-mail:** th2063@columbia.edu.

**Kimberley Roussin Isett** is an assistant professor of management at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. She received her PhD in management with a specialization in organization theory from the University of Arizona. Her research focuses on institutional pressures and dynamics in implementing government services, with a particular interest in coordination and collaboration among agencies.  
**E-mail:** ki2129@columbia.edu.

*Performance management and citizen participation are being used by local governments to improve government accountability and responsiveness. In some cases, local governments are integrating these two trends. One area of local government in which this trend has not been assessed is special districts. This paper uses data from a study of nine special districts in the state of Texas to fill this void. To assess citizen participation in performance management among the districts, we interviewed district managers, analyzed minutes from governing board meetings, and conducted citizen focus groups in three regions of the state. Our findings suggest that although districts may not yet be in tune with the latest performance management trends, they are making efforts to engage citizens in other ways. We recommend ways that districts can build on these experiences and more effectively incorporate citizens in the development, analysis, and reporting of performance measures.*

Over the past decade, public management scholars and practitioners have expressed growing interest in the use of both performance management tools and citizen participation to increase government accountability and effectiveness. Recently, we have seen a movement to integrate these two trends, encouraging governments to rely more on citizen input in the development of performance indicators and the monitoring of performance. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, for example, has funded a number of initiatives to encourage municipal governments to involve citizens in developing and implementing performance management systems. Examples of these initiatives include Iowa's Citizen-Initiated Performance Assessment project, the Fund for the City of New York's citizen-based assessments of the effectiveness of city government services, and Rutgers University's National Center for Public Productivity. These projects focus on municipal governments as a key starting point because

of their opportunities for direct connections to citizens in management processes.

This paper presents data on another level of local government—special districts—and explores the extent to which the movement toward citizen involvement in performance management has spread outside traditional government structures. Special districts, which for the purposes of this paper include both districts and authorities, are government units that provide a limited number of specialized services such as transportation, fire protection, water management, health care, or housing.<sup>1</sup> Given that much of the literature on special districts has criticized this form of government as being less accountable and less transparent than general-purpose governments, we expect that the knowledge of performance management tools and receptiveness to citizen involvement within districts to be limited.

To explore our hypothesis, we conducted a pilot study to assess citizen involvement and performance management in special districts in three metropolitan areas

---

Over the past decade, public management scholars and practitioners have expressed growing interest in the use of both performance management tools and citizen participation to increase government accountability and effectiveness.

---

in the state of Texas: Houston/Harris County, San Antonio/Bexar County, and Austin/Travis County. The pilot study involved interviews with district managers, analyses of governing board minutes, and focus groups with citizen activists in the three regions. This paper presents our findings, which suggest that although districts engage citizens to varying degrees in decision making, they typically do not use citizen input to determine performance standards or monitor performance. Drawing on ideas elicited in our focus groups and from professional practice guidelines, this paper concludes by offering recommendations on how districts can more effectively link citizen interests to performance management.

## Background: Accountability through Citizen Participation and Performance Management

Many policy scholars and political theorists have argued that direct citizen participation in government, particularly through public deliberation, is fundamental to establishing a responsive and accountable democracy (Box 1998; Ostrom 1997; Pateman 1970; Tocqueville 1835–40).<sup>2</sup> Forums such as town hall meetings and citizen referenda have long been used to allow citizens to participate directly in policy making in the United States. However, the opportunities for citizens to participate in administrative or policy implementation decisions have been less visible until the second half of the 20th century (Roberts 2004). Over the past 30 years, increasing demands from citizens to participate in administrative decisions and the passage of policies that mandate direct citizen participation have led to greater participation by citizens in decision making within a wide range of public service domains (Roberts 2004; Thomas 1995).

In studying the growth of public participation efforts, scholars have begun to identify the benefits of direct citizen involvement, such as greater citizen support for government decisions (Kweit and Kweit 2004), increased social capital in communities (Leach, Pelkey, and Sabatier 2002; Putnam 1993), and increased capacity to resolve “wicked” problems (Roberts 2002). The rise in public participation is certainly not always beneficial, as these efforts can be costly, time-consuming, and ineffectual in reaching consensus on solutions to problems (Thomas 1995).

Given these costs and benefits, public administrators and public administration scholars have begun to seriously examine the conditions that support the effective use of public participation (King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Renn et al. 1993; Thomas 1995). In general, no one best method exists for integrating citizen input into policy and management decisions. A wide variety of tools and forums exist for citizens to participate in decision-making processes, and the advantage of a particular tool, or suite of tools, often depends on the purposes of the agency decision, its mission, and its legal mandates (Thomas 1995). Historically, open public meetings and hearings have been the predominant statutorily required methods for ensuring citizen input. However, another mechanism that has been found to be effective in program planning and assessment is the use of citizen advisory committees or special task forces to identify community needs and interests and to solicit recommendations to meet those needs. Citizen surveys are also commonly used to assess opinions about

public issues, particularly when agencies desire perspectives that are representative of a large community.

More informal methods of public participation are also commonly used to engage citizens. Some informal methods include calling up key contacts or community leaders to assess community needs and opinions or sending agency representatives to attend meetings of community groups (Carr and Halvorsen 2001; Thomas 1995). Recently, e-government initiatives, which allow citizens to voice their opinions and needs through Web sites and Listservs, have become a relatively low-cost way to facilitate more transparent and accessible decision-making processes (Thomas and Streib 2003; Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005).

These citizen participation tools typically support what Roberts (2002) calls “direction-based” accountability, in which administrative goals are aligned with political and constituent goals. Another form of accountability in public organizations is performance-based accountability (Roberts 2002). Performance-based accountability typically requires systems or tools for identifying measures of organizational inputs, outputs, and outcomes and for collecting performance data and then comparing those data against agency goals or standards. Public managers can then use performance information to help refine internal goals and strategies (i.e., “managing for results”), as well as to garner external support for the agency by sharing performance information with citizens, oversight agencies, and legislators (Moynihan 2005). One of the difficulties of developing performance management systems is that public agency goals are frequently based on legislative and legal mandates that are vague and ill defined. These mandates influence both the indicators that agencies select to measure performance and the criteria used to assess those indicators.

Performance-based accountability, therefore, is linked to direction-based accountability and requires citizen participation because citizen expectations play a critical role in shaping how an agency defines its mission and defining the criteria for “success” that will be used in meeting those goals. Not surprisingly, then, some scholars have recognized that performance management reform efforts are not likely to succeed in achieving government accountability apart from active citizen dialogue and exchange in public decision making (Harmon 1995; Roberts 2002). Successful implementation of performance management systems has been associated with external support, not only from top management and elected officials but from citizens as well (Berman and Wang 2000).<sup>3</sup>

---

... another mechanism that has been found to be effective in program planning and assessment is the use of citizen advisory committees or special task forces to identify community needs and interests and to solicit recommendations to meet those needs.

---

On a practical level, the movement to incorporate citizen participation into performance management decisions is relatively new. At this time, only a handful of efforts to use citizens in the design of performance management systems have been started across local governments throughout the United States (NCCP 2005). The National Center for Public Productivity's Citizen-Driven Government Performance Initiative, for example, tracks a number of these cases and makes recommendations to municipal governments on how to engage citizens in performance management decisions. These cases include a project to encourage citizen-initiated performance measures in Iowa. Researchers following this initiative found that citizens are able to identify performance measures that local governments often ignore, such as the quality of customer service, thus enhancing the legitimacy of performance measurement (Ho and Coates 2002). Furthermore, a study by the Urban Institute that examined performance management and citizen involvement by local agencies in five states found that "[c]itizen participation elevates performance management from a system promoting greater efficiency in operations and resource allocations to a system for more responsive government" (Dusenbury, Liner, and Vinson 2002, 4).

One area of local government in which citizen participation and performance management efforts have not been assessed is special-purpose governments. Given that the number of special-district governments in the United States has almost tripled over the past 50 years to an estimated 35,052 districts (U.S. Census Bureau 2002), it is important to examine accountability mechanisms such as citizen participation and performance management at this level. Another key reason to evaluate citizen participation and performance management among special districts is to evaluate the charge that these governmental units are less accountable to citizens. Because of the specialized nature of the services they provide, districts are often less visible than general-purpose governments, and citizens may know relatively little about their political and management processes, potentially leading to unchecked service financing (Axelrod 1992; Bollens 1957; Mitchell 1992). As Kathryn Foster (1997, 4) notes, "[d]istricts enjoy the financial reach, tax-exempt status, and quasi-monopolistic service delivery advantages of public governments, together with the political isolation, management flexibility, and financial discretion of private corporations."

Understanding the extent to which districts engage in or rely on citizens to identify performance indicators and communicate with citizens about performance will help us to weigh in on the argument that districts are not accountable to citizens. In addition, focusing on this type of government provides evidence to determine the extent to which the trend toward citizen-

driven performance measures has spread to this area of local government. If special districts are commonly set up to be less accountable or are shielded from public input, we would expect the external incentives or pressures from principals to adopt performance management systems and to include citizens in organizational functions to be largely absent.

## Methodology

To investigate and compare how special districts relate citizen interests to performance goals and indicators, we used a small-*n* comparative study design with multiple methods of data collection. First, we addressed the districts' own perspectives through interviews with managers (directors, general managers, or chief executives) of nine special-purpose governments in the state of Texas. Second, we analyzed minutes from governing board meetings of those same districts. Third, we assessed the perspectives of residents served by the districts through focus groups to investigate citizens' knowledge of special-district performance, as well as their familiarity with public-input processes in districts.

We chose to conduct this analysis in Texas because districts in that state vary substantially by type, size, age, and location, thus offering a valuable setting for comparative analysis. Additionally, Texas is one of the states with the highest number of districts overall, according to the U.S. Census of Governments (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). In fact, among the 50 states, Texas ranks highest in the number of special districts authorized by city or county governments, with 1,089 districts in 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002), and third among the states in all special districts (authorized by state and local governments), with 2,245.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) identifies 24 different categories of districts. Research has suggested—and we suspect—that categorical differences and service-delivery foci among the different types of districts may influence the performance and operations of districts (Foster 1997; Stephens and Wikstrom 1998). With this in mind, we created our sampling frame intending a most-same/most-different methodology.

Our sampling frame was constructed from the Government Organization Directory in the 2002 U.S. Census of Governments. We limited our geographic scope to the population of districts in three metropolitan areas in Texas: Austin/Travis County, Houston/Harris County, and San Antonio/Bexar County. This sampling frame allowed for comparisons of districts and citizen perceptions of districts within and across municipal regions. We also limited our sampling frame to districts in three diverse areas of public service: water-related districts, health-related districts, and housing- and community development-related districts. These district types were selected because of

their prominence among district types and because they matched the investigators' substantive expertise.

Our final sample of districts in Texas included nine organizations. We initially used purposive sampling to identify 14 districts from the three metropolitan areas, choosing cases to ensure that the sample included a range of district sizes and ages. However, after contacting districts by mail and telephone to request participation in our study, five districts either did not respond or chose not to participate, resulting in the final sample of nine districts. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the districts, their functions, and their metropolitan areas.

The first phase of our research involved semistructured in-person interviews with district managers. The interviews focused on both knowledge and use of performance management systems, as well as the role of citizens in organizational processes. We also queried managers about the role of citizen involvement in districts more broadly, the importance of citizen involvement, and their use of public input in management decisions. After the interviews, a transcription of the audiotapes was entered into a data management and analysis software system, QSR's *NVivo*. We then coded the interviews to compare performance management practices and the use of and opinions about citizen involvement in district performance across interviews.

After the interviews, governing board meeting minutes were collected from each district interviewed. The minutes were analyzed to assess how often and in what context performance indicators were discussed by the governing body and to examine discussions (if any) of the use of citizen input to identify performance goals, to measure performance, and to use or respond to performance reports and citizen feedback. The minutes collected covered two years of board meetings from June 2002 to May 2004. This time frame was selected to capture cyclical discussions of performance measurement and reporting. Unfortunately, one of the districts (A1) refused our request for copies of their board minutes; thus, our sample for document analysis contained only eight districts instead of nine.<sup>4</sup> The documents were coded in the same way as the interview data. Once again, QSR's *NVivo* was used for the analysis.

The third source of data for our study came from focus groups that we convened in each of the three metropolitan areas where the sample districts operate. We used the focus groups to gather a general picture of the knowledge that citizens who were active in local government (but not necessarily active with districts) had about the existence, operations, and performance of special districts in their community. We sought out citizens active in local government because we felt they would be "in the know" and thus more likely to have knowledge of or interest in district operations than the average citizen. Although active citizens are not a representative sample of communities, we based our sample on the assumption that these individuals would be a good litmus test for the knowledge of less involved individuals.

Focus group participants were initially identified by contacting city council members and city managers in the three metropolitan regions and asking for the names and contact information of nonelected citizens who were active in local government. We also relied on professional contacts involved in state government to provide the names of several citizen activists who were knowledgeable in the area of local government. In contacting the initial list of citizens, we asked them to nominate other individuals who were active in local government and might be interested in participating in the focus groups. We invited between 16 and 20 people in each municipal region to participate in the focus groups. Eight people attended the focus group in Houston, seven in San Antonio, and nine in Austin. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted by the principal investigators.

## Findings: Searching for Connections between Citizens and Performance

### *Evidence from Manager Interviews*

In looking at how districts involve citizens in performance management decisions, it is clear that most of the districts in our study do not directly involve citizens in either the design or reporting of performance information. (See table 2 for a summary of the methods districts use to engage citizens reported by managers.) When asked about the extent to which citizens are involved in district decision making and performance management, most of the district managers

**Table 1** Overview of Districts Included in the Pilot Study

Metropolitan Area	District Code	Type/Mission
A	A1	Housing: Provide low-income housing
	A2	Water: Supply water, wastewater treatment, and water reuse
	A3	Water: Provide low-cost utility services and ensure the protection of the area's natural resources
B	B1	Health: Provide acute and emergency care for the indigent population
	B2	Housing: Provide affordable housing and promoting economic self-sufficiency
C	C1	Water: Preserve, protect, and manage the river and its tributaries
	C2	Health: Promote health and prevent disease
	C3	Housing: Build and maintain affordable housing
	C4	Water: Preserve and protect aquifer

were not able to identify explicit procedures or formalized processes whereby citizens contribute to the establishment of performance criteria or the reviewing of performance measures.

However, at least one district manager (B1) cited concrete ways in which advisory boards play a role in the performance measurement processes of the organization. Not coincidentally, this is the same district that gives its citizen advisory board some actual decision making authority (discussed later). In explaining how this district uses its advisory board to assess organizational performance, the district manager stated, “They also tell us where you are doing a great job or not so good a job.” Despite this effort to include citizens in performance monitoring, the organization has a weak performance management system.

Furthermore, the district uses the performance measures that citizens help to design only to a very limited extent by incorporating them into the strategic-planning process. Another district (A3) also integrates citizen input into its strategic-planning and goal-setting processes, which the district claimed to use as criteria to help develop performance measures. The district, however, did not identify specific indicators of performance that citizens had directly developed.

The limited use of citizen involvement in performance management by our sample districts is not at all surprising, given that we found relatively weak performance management systems in place in many of the districts (see Isett and Heikkila, under review). In fact, of all the nine districts we studied, only two of the districts (A3 and C2) had any recognizable

**Table 2** Use of Citizens in District Decision Making (Reported by District Managers)

District Type	Code	Input on Performance Indicators	Reporting of Performance	Advisory Boards	Other Tools
Health	B1	Some input on indicator development and usefulness	Monthly reports to governing board	11 community boards plus one overarching community advisory board	“Management by walking around”; attending local community meetings
	C2	No direct citizen input	Annually to the public, periodically to elected officials	One general advisory board and other supplemental board with ties to specific issues and initiatives	City council feedback; media
Housing	A1	No direct citizen input	Board annual progress report	One board with general advisory duties	Required resident survey; informal resident feedback
	B2	No direct citizen input	Board	Several boards	Required resident survey
	C3	No direct citizen input	Internally, occasionally at executive meetings; externally to federal regulators	Several boards, one at each housing development	Required resident survey
Water	A2	No direct citizen input, but committees under board may request performance metrics	Some reporting through newsletter and community meetings	Three committees under district board: administrative and community relations, finance/audit, and engineering and operations	Weekly meeting with community leaders’ club
	A3	No direct citizen input, but some input on strategic planning	Quarterly updates to customers	Several committees from local irrigation districts (customers); light and river advisory panels	Professional poll of 1,200 customers and citizens every two to three years; integrated resource planning process; open house
	C1	No direct citizen input	Quarterly newsletter to city, county, other government agencies and public mailing list	Several, including flood control panel; watershed improvement advisory committee; river improvement committee	Scanning community needs through county and city jurisdictions
	C4	No direct citizen input	Monthly general manager’s report to interested parties and officials; external water advisory committee submits report to legislature	Several, including technical advisory group, water quality task force	Public meetings for proposed decisions

performance management systems in place at the time of our interviews, although all had some sort of performance measurement process. So, in the end, it is difficult to discern whether the lack of contribution to performance management by citizens is a function of the lack of performance management or the lack of interest in citizen input.

Despite the deficiency of citizen involvement in performance management, the districts in this sample incorporate citizen input in other ways that at least indirectly influence their assessments of performance. As table 2 summarizes, many use communication tools such as newsletters and quarterly updates to inform citizens of what they are doing, but these are one-way processes. Occasionally, some districts seek citizen input through public meetings, particularly when major funding issues are on the table. One district manager (A2) mentioned working informally with community groups to gauge citizen opinions by attending a weekly “Men’s Breakfast Club” for city leaders. Another district (A3) also reported using citizen surveys to gather input from the public.

The most common way that districts reported engaging with citizens is through the use of advisory boards or committees. Most of the advisory boards in our sample of districts have no formal policy-making or binding input into agency matters. Rather, the advisory boards are used to solicit ideas about particular projects or to maintain two-way ties to the community more generally. As one manager stated, “It is a great mechanism for us to go out and educate people on what we are doing . . . and to get [the public] to tell us what they need in the community.” Though most boards are purely advisory, in at least one case (B1), a citizen advisory panel has decision-making power and can actually veto board decisions on matters of direct concern to clients. One of the water districts (A2) has three committees consisting of approximately 20 citizen volunteers that make recommendations to the board of directors on specific management decisions, including engineering and operations, finance, and administration. Overall, the extent to which the districts rely on citizens as organizational resources varies (none of that variance could be attributed to district type or location), yet all districts reported using an advisory format—at least nominally—to include citizens in organizational governance.

Though all of the district managers acknowledged the value of citizen input in decision making, managers also exhibited some skepticism about the abilities and skills of the citizens serving on their advisory boards, particularly their ability to make informed decisions about management issues. Typical comments about citizen input included, “They ask for things that are not practical,” “I think on the education part and understanding of what we do and what we are capable of doing, the learning curve is

---

The limited use of citizen involvement in performance management by our sample districts is not at all surprising, given that we found relatively weak performance management systems in place in many of the districts.

---

way down there,” and “Some of the things they ask you for, you would not put in any plan.” Part of this skepticism seems to stem from the fact that district managers reported having difficulty finding interested and willing participants to serve on their boards. A few districts mentioned that they believed their citizen

---

Though all of the district managers acknowledged the value of citizen input in decision making, managers also exhibited some skepticism about the abilities and skills of the citizens serving on their advisory boards, particularly their ability to make informed decisions about management issues.

---

advisory boards could be more useful and effective if they could recruit interested and motivated individuals, but in the end, as one manager stated, “They do not want to be involved.” To address this problem, one of the district managers noted that he had initiated a “stakeholder identification” process, focusing on expanding the list of relevant stakeholders beyond those who traditionally participate in citizen advisory committees.

Alternatively, the manager of the district whose advisory board holds some discretionary authority had a more positive view of participant recruitment (perhaps not unrelated to the real authority of the group). This manager stated,

It is a self-sustaining advisory board. We don’t appoint them. Initially, the first board was appointed; they served for  $x$  number of years and the terms were staggered. Whenever the person on the board gets reappointed . . . or any new members come in, there is a vote taken and people apply for board seats . . . [it is] pretty much self-sustaining. They reappoint themselves or other members of the community. There are no vacancies. I can tell you, when it comes down to voting on people, it sometimes gets political. . . . And I say, “look you work with your board, we do not appoint the board members.” But we have very few vacancies, the meetings are very well attended, and we take it very seriously.

### **Evidence from District Governing Boards**

According to the governing board meeting minutes reviewed for our study, the governing boards of the sample districts are largely interested in financial outcomes and service-quality performance indicators. Agenda items that were common across all boards in each of the monthly meeting minutes were financial audits and the evaluation of specific projects, and sometimes the assessment of needs for future projects, programs, and resources. The interests and needs of citizens as they relate to performance were not commonly discussed during the two-year time frame, although meetings occasionally included citizen input on certain programmatic issues.

Of the eight districts that provided minutes to us, four made no mention of citizen participation in the two years of minutes we reviewed. District C4 discussed the findings from a citizen advisory committee in one of its monthly meetings over the two years, though this was not related to performance but to program planning. Similarly, district C3's board discussed citizen input on program or project planning at three separate meetings. District A3 discussed citizen input and management decisions in a number of meetings, such as opportunities for staff to gather and use input from customers on proposed rate increases and on long-term planning for water provision. Only two of the boards (C2 and C3) discussed citizen participation in performance management directly, but each at only two of the meetings over 24 months. Notably, district C3 had an ad hoc committee that focused on public input as a form of performance measurement.

### **Evidence from the Focus Groups**

The focus group sessions that we conducted confirmed the findings from our manager interviews and analysis of board meeting minutes: Districts do not appear to seek input from citizens on performance criteria and are not very effective at reporting on performance to citizens. As with our other sources of data, the focus groups indicate that citizens typically participate in district decision making only through advisory boards. Moreover, only a few of the focus group participants had actually participated on district advisory boards. Overall, we did not find any marked differences in the extent to which citizens had participated in districts, or their knowledge of district operations, by district type or function.

We did, however, notice differences across the three communities in terms of how much citizens know about special districts and the extent to which they participate in districts. In region B,

knowledge of and participation in districts was quite limited, despite the fact that all of the focus group members were active in local neighborhood associations and other civic groups and frequently participated in municipal governance activities. Even more notable was the fact that the focus group members in region B generally did not separate the role of special districts from municipal and county government. As one participant said, "Special districts normally have to go to the county or the city in order to get things done." During this focus group session, some members were able to identify a particular hospital district or a housing authority, but focus group members frequently directed their frustration with government in general toward the city. Notably, it was only in this region that the districts did not mention citizens at all in their governing board minutes. Thus, there seemed to be a lack of connection between citizens and districts in region B.

Participants in region C were more familiar with and had more direct involvement with districts—one member had served on a housing district task force, another had served on a water district task force, and a third had spent time working on lobbying efforts affecting a local health district. We saw a fairly positive trend in this region regarding the relationship between citizens and districts. Not only had some of our focus group members participated in district advisory boards, but our document analysis revealed that the districts in this region at least discussed citizen input at their governing board meetings (although the actual influence these discussions had on decisions is unclear).

Even more than in region C, the focus group members in region A were all quite familiar with special districts, a few of them having worked directly with districts as employees or employees of organizations that interacted with the districts. The types of districts some members had interacted with included a housing authority, a transportation authority, and various water districts. What was most telling about the different degrees of knowledge among the focus groups was the extent to which the participants in region A understood the organization and structure of special districts. For example, participants commented on some of the accountability problems of districts being tied to the legislative processes of setting up districts, the funding sources of districts, and the different ways in which district board members were chosen.

---

... participants commented on some of the accountability problems of districts being tied to the legislative processes of setting up districts, the funding sources of districts, and the different ways in which district board members were chosen.

---

For example, participants commented on some of the accountability problems of districts being tied to the legislative processes of setting up districts, the funding sources of districts, and the different ways in which district board members were chosen.

The focus group sessions also indicated that public participation was seen as both valuable and important

to these citizens, but they did not feel the opportunities for participating in districts were widely available. One participant in region B who was interested in public housing issues noted that “there hasn’t been any citizen participation or involvement in the decision-making process” for planning public housing. A participant in region C noted that citizens “have to badger special districts to do some things” and that “they often do not inform neighborhood associations about issues pertinent to them.” Similarly, a participant in region A felt that “many districts have been set up to put layers in . . . and try to get around citizen participation.” Notably, none of the participants recalled working on issues to assess the performance of districts, making recommendations about performance indicators, or even having received information about district performance.

In general, most of the citizen activists in our sample had a certain cynicism toward government’s use of their volunteer time. Across the three sites, a consistent theme was that although these citizens participated in order to have an impact in their communities, more often than not, they felt there was a tokenism to having citizen input. Citizen input was described as “box-checking” or a “formality.”

Thus, the overall mood of the three focus groups suggests that citizens generally are not viewed as part of the accountability equation in district governance. Part of this frustration may be a result of their lack of knowledge about districts. Another source of participants’ frustrations may stem from the fact that they often see the results of their experiences participating with other forms of local government as unsatisfactory, feeling that decision makers often do not listen to their concerns when they do participate.

Because our sample of participants was not a representative sample of the population, we cannot generalize these findings, but given that these citizens were chosen because they were “in the know” with local government, they certainly suggest there are differences across these regions in the extent to which local governments are open to citizen input. Though this could be attributable to some selection biases among the participants, it could also indicate that the larger governance setting of a community plays a vital role in spawning knowledge of special district operations and performance.

## Recommendations

In addition to providing feedback on citizen knowledge of district operations and performance, the focus groups elicited ideas about improving citizen participation and communication about performance. First, public participation needs to be taken more seriously by districts, and more opportunities need to be opened for two-way communication between districts

and citizens. In terms of opportunities for participation, a consistent recommendation across all focus groups was that citizen advisory committees could be used more effectively by choosing participants who are more representative of the community and then using the advice from these groups more consistently in decision making. As one of the focus group members pointed out from her experience with a water district, the district “had citizen boards, [but] would make decisions prior to citizen input being presented.”

In thinking about these recommendations, one caveat—which ties into the responses gained from the manager interviews—is that a number of the citizens we spoke with did not want to spend an inordinate amount of time participating in decision making. Given that the citizens we met with tended to be quite active in local government and were typically stretched thin on their community commitments, this is not surprising.<sup>5</sup> In light of this sentiment, some of the other suggestions for improving citizen participation included using surveys and actively soliciting information from neighborhood groups to gather input on proposed decisions or goals and widening the search for willing participants instead of relying on a limited number of known individuals. Some participants commented that they simply wanted more information from the districts, particularly better financial reporting and more direct information on district operations. Using the media and press releases to inform citizens about district operations and to explain how they are meeting their goals was also a suggestion that a number of participants raised. According to one participant, “media is essential. . . . People get newsletters from an organization and these are likely to just get tossed.”

Obviously, engaging citizens in the management decisions of public organizations is a complex issue; the array of management decisions and policy choices can require a variety of types of citizen input and involvement. The focus of this study is not to explain this array of options—rather, it is to give insights into ways citizens can be more engaged in performance management decisions and reporting. Thus, to direct our recommendations from the focus groups to this issue, we have categorized some of the ideas from the focus groups according to ways to (1) garner citizen input on performance criteria, (2) improve performance management processes to allow more citizen involvement, and (3) communicate performance information with citizens more effectively (see table 3). To demonstrate the appropriateness of these recommendations for performance management, we have contextualized them by placing them against standards for performance management offered by the Governmental Accounting and Standards Board (GASB). These standards come from the GASB’s 2003 special report on “Reporting Performance

Information: Suggested Criteria for Effective Communication.” The GASB’s standards are clearly linked to the ideas produced in the focus groups.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from this study offer valuable insights for the growing body of literature linking citizen participation to performance management among public agencies by examining a level of government that has not previously been addressed. This research also contributes to the broad body of literature on special districts, particularly theories concerned with accountability in special-district governments. In some respects, our findings are consistent with the literature, which suggests districts are largely hidden from public scrutiny, though not necessarily to the extent that critics of special districts argue. Special-district governments, like many other levels of government, engage citizens in decision making to some degree through the use of citizen advisory boards, public meetings, and informal mechanisms such as networking with community organizations. This finding was consistent across the three types of districts and three regions we evaluated. The limited use of citizens to establish performance management criteria and the weaknesses of these agencies in reporting, however, indicates that districts certainly have room for improvement in achieving accountability. Many of the ideas for improvement gleaned from our focus groups are clearly linked to the professional standards being put forth at other levels of government. Moreover, as recent research on other

local governments has shown, these recommendations are indeed feasible.

Of course, the feasibility of incorporating citizen input into performance decisions assumes that citizens are willing to participate in districts and pay attention to district decisions. Some district managers noted that people simply do not attend their meetings, and our focus group participants acknowledged that many people simply do not want to engage in government decisions or do not have the time. One of our unanticipated findings was the difference we found across the three regions (rather than across district type) in our focus group participants’ knowledge of and experience with special districts. Focus group participants in region B were much less informed about districts than those in regions A and C, whereas the focus group in region A exhibited in-depth knowledge of the districts in that region. We suspect this may have something to do with the degree of openness and transparency within the larger governance setting in

---

Even when citizens actively participate with districts, it is important to keep in mind that the citizens who tend to get involved may not necessarily be representative of their broader communities.

---

these communities, which could nurture mutual trust between citizens and government and thus greater willingness to participate.

Even when citizens actively participate with districts, it is important to keep in mind that the citizens who tend to get involved may not necessarily be

representative of their broader communities. Research on public participation and other voluntary efforts suggests that people from dominant status groups (e.g., well-educated, middle- to upper-income

**Table 3** Recommendations for Citizen Roles in Performance Management in Special Districts

Theme	Focus Group Responses	GASB Standards
Garnering public input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure citizen input is representative of the community</li> <li>Engage in education and public awareness about district functions</li> <li>Use surveys more often</li> <li>Involve citizens in planning processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a variety of forums for gauging input</li> <li>Include citizens, elected officials, and employees in establishing the goals of organization</li> </ul>
Performance management process ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop more transparent planning processes</li> <li>Ensure managers look at the indicators and respond to them</li> <li>Conduct third-party audits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a strategic plan with mission, goals, and objectives clearly stated</li> <li>Information should be reliable and citizens should be able to assess the reliability of sources</li> </ul>
Performance measurement reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inform neighborhood associations about issues pertinent to them</li> <li>Issue press releases and work more closely with the media</li> <li>Report budget and financial data more often and more directly with citizens</li> <li>Report on what the districts are actually <i>doing</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make information easy to access and report at multiple levels</li> <li>Performance information should be reported through a variety of mediums</li> <li>Performance information should include data on resources and costs of programs and outputs</li> <li>Measures should be relevant; focus on major or critical programs and services and major goals and objectives</li> </ul>

citizens) are more likely to get involved in public forums (Claiborn and Martin 2000), leaving disadvantaged groups underrepresented in public participation forums (Roberts 2004). Thus, the likelihood of truly representative “participation” may be a misnomer for forums such as advisory committees and public meetings.

However “nonrepresentative” these forums may be, those who participate are also likely to participate in other civic activities. So although they are overburdened, they also have the capacity to share information outside the immediate circle of participants, networking with other groups and potentially spreading knowledge and information informally. Building institutions that can empower these citizens and others is what Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) argue is essential to effective governance.

We fully acknowledge that the findings of this small-*n* study are limited in their generalizability. Yet we believe that our multiple sources of data, our attention to multiple types of districts, and our analysis of multiple locations furnishes a measure of empirical rigor. The next step in this research would be to perform a larger-*n* analysis to see whether these findings hold in other settings and across multiple districts. In the meantime, we recommend that district managers and policy makers begin to think about ways that districts can use the lessons drawn from our focus groups, as well as the insights of the government accountability movement that is spreading across other local governments.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s Program on Performance Assessment of Municipal Governments for its support of this research. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of Deborah Kerr throughout this project. This project benefited greatly from the help of all of our research assistants: Ilona Pesti, Shanette Lewis, Leslie Barron, Leila Azari, Noopur Batsha, and Amy Osorio.

## Notes

1. We acknowledge that special districts and public authorities are not the same. However, the U.S. Census of Governments counts both types of entities in the same category. Thus, we use the term *districts* to be consistent with the information contained in the Census of Governments.
2. On the other hand, many scholars have argued that public participation can lead to conflict and can disrupt the functioning of political processes. See Roberts (2004) for an overview of the literature on both the benefits and drawbacks of public participation.
3. This linkage between citizen participation and performance management has not always been

obvious in the government reform movement.

As Schachter (1995) argues, the reinvention movement and the New Public Management paradigm of the mid-1990s largely viewed citizens as “customers” to be served rather than “owners” who are active and engaged in public agencies.

These movements arguably espoused performance management, but not the active participation of citizens in making performance management decisions.

4. The organization that did not participate in our document review was contacted several times by mail (three times) and by telephone (six times) to obtain the documents over a period of three months. Unfortunately, although this organization had agreed to supply the documents, we never received them. After reviewing the documents from the other two organizations in this class (housing), we suspected that the added value of the missing documents would be fairly low, as these organizations were heavily focused on compliance with federal government regulations and did little in the way of performance management or citizen input beyond what was required of them by federal regulations. This conclusion was confirmed by the content of the interviews.
5. On a positive note, all of the citizens we met with reported a strong sense of satisfaction from their participation in local government. Even if the process itself was sometimes frustrating for them, most felt they were doing something useful for their neighborhoods.

## References

- Axelrod, Donald. 1992. *Shadow Government: The Hidden World of Public Authorities—and How They Control over \$1 Trillion of Your Money*. New York: Wiley.
- Berman, Evan, and XiaoHu Wang. 2000. Performance Measurement in U.S. Counties: Capacity for Reform. *Public Administration Review* 60(5): 409–20.
- Bollens, John C. 1957. *Special District Governments in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Box, Richard C. 1998. *Citizen Governance: Leading American Communities into the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Carr, Deborah S., and Kathleen Halvorsen. 2001. An Evaluation of Three Democratic, Community-Based Approaches to Citizen Participation: Surveys, Conversations with Community Groups, and Community Dinners. *Society and Natural Resources* 14(2): 107–26.
- Claiborn, Michele P., and Paul S. Martin. 2000. Trusting and Joining? An Empirical Test of the Reciprocal Nature of Social Capital. *Political Behavior* 22(4): 267–91.
- Denhardt, Robert B., and Janet Vinzant Denhardt. 2000. *The New Public Service: Serving Rather*

- Than Steering. *Public Administration Review* 60(6): 549–59.
- Dusenbury, Pat, Blaine Liner, and Elisa Vinson. 2002. *States, Citizens, and Local Performance Management*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. [www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/citizens.pdf](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/citizens.pdf) [accessed January 23, 2007].
- Foster, Kathryn A. 1997. *The Political Economy of Special-Purpose Government*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Harmon, Michael M. 1995. *Responsibility as Paradox: A Critique of Rational Discourse on Government*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ho, Alfred Tat-Kei, and Paul Coates. 2002. Citizen Participation: Legitimizing Performance Measurement as a Decision Tool. *Government Finance Review*, April, 8–10.
- Isett, Kimberley R., and Tanya Heikkila. Is There Accountability in the Shadows? Exploring the Use of Performance Management in Special Purpose Governments. Manuscript under review.
- King, Cheryl Simrell, Kathryn M. Feltey, and Bridget O'Neill Susel. 1998. The Question of Participation: Toward Authentic Public Participation in Public Administration. *Public Administration Review* 58(4): 317–26.
- Kweit, Mary G., and Robert W. Kweit 2004. Citizen Participation and Citizen Evaluation in Disaster Recovery. *American Review of Public Administration* 34(4): 354–73.
- Leach, William D., Neil W. Pelkey, and Paul A. Sabatier. 2002. Stakeholder Partnerships as Collaborative Policymaking: Evaluation Criteria Applied to Watershed Management in California and Washington. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21(4): 645–70.
- Mitchell, Jerry. 1992. *Public Authorities and Public Policy: The Business of Government*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Moynihan, Donald. P. 2005. Why and How Do State Governments Adopt and Implement “Managing for Results” Reforms? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 15(2): 219–43.
- National Center for Public Productivity. 2005. Citizen-Driven Government Performance. [www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~ncpp/cdgp/cases.html](http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~ncpp/cdgp/cases.html) [accessed January 23, 2007].
- Ostrom, Vincent. 1997. *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pateman, Carole. 1970. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Renn, Ortwin, Thomas Webler, H. Rakel, Brandon Johnson, and Peter Diemel. 1993. Public Participation in Decision Making: A Three-Step Procedure. *Policy Sciences* 26(3): 189–214.
- Roberts, Nancy C. 2002. Dialogue and Accountability. *Public Administration Review* 62(6): 658–69.
- . 2004. Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation. *American Review of Public Administration* 34(4): 315–53.
- Schacter, Hindy Lauer. 1995. Reinventing Government or Reinventing Ourselves: Two Models for Improving Government Performance. *Public Administration Review* 55(6): 530–37.
- Stephens, G. Ross, and Nelson Wikstrom 1998. Trends in Special Districts. *State and Local Government Review* 30(2): 129–38.
- Thomas, John C. 1995. *Public Participation in Public Decisions: New Skills and Strategies for Public Managers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thomas, John C., and Gregory Streib. 2003. The New Face of Government: Citizen-Initiated Contacts in the Era of E-Government. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13(1): 83–102.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1835–40. *Democracy in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2002. *2002 Census of Governments*. Vol. 1, no. 1, Government Organization. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Census Bureau.
- Welch, Eric W., Charles C. Hinnant, and M. Jae Moon. 2005. Linking Citizen Satisfaction with E-Government and Trust in Government. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 15(3): 371–91.

Copyright of *Public Administration Review* is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.