

Forces Underlying the Emergence of Privatization in Parks and Recreation (Executive Summary)

John L. Crompton

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DEBATES ON PRIVATIZATION USUALLY REVOLVE around issues such as the relative cost of services, personnel displacements, service equity, and effects on service quality. These are important concerns, but are often only the visible manifestation of much broader issues. It is suggested that four macro forces drive privatization and, when viewed together, these forces constitute a coherent framework. If participants in privatization controversies step back and use this framework as the basis for reviewing the “big picture,” it may reposition their perspective, which may help to reconcile polarized viewpoints and build consensus on appropriate actions.

The initial force often is a shortage of tax funds, since this causes many park and recreation agencies to move away from the direct provision model of service delivery, because of its relatively high cost, inherent personnel inflexibility, and the constraining influence of bureaucratic procedures and regulations.

This pragmatic concern may be reinforced by political agendas from both ends of the political spectrum. Three philosophical perspectives may arise in a privatization debate that are usually associated with the conservative right wing of the political spectrum. Pragmatists seek a more effective government and see privatization as a means to that end. Commercial interests seek to obtain more business by taking over some of an agency’s financing, production, or operating roles. For ideologists, privatiza-

tion is a political agenda aimed at ensuring that government plays a smaller role compared to private institutions. From the perspective of populists on the left liberal wing of the political spectrum, privatization is a means of achieving a better society through giving people greater power to satisfy their common needs, while diminishing that of large public bureaucracies.

A third force undergirding privatization is a recognition of the inefficiencies associated with monopolistic service delivery. Monopolies are notoriously inefficient because they lack the incentive to be responsive to clientele’s demands that competition provides. Hence, they are aggressively resisted and forbidden by law in the private sector. However, in many communities a park and recreation agency is a monopoly supplier of many services.

Privatization is seen as a means of inducing competition into public agency monopoly situations.

The final force is an awareness of the distinction between a park and recreation agency recognizing a need for a service to be provided, and the agency producing it. These are two separate decisions. Under

the direct provider model, agencies produce services they believe should be provided, but there is increasing recognition that alternative production options may offer superior alternatives. Acceptance of this position shifts park and recreation agencies from being sellers of services to being facilitators or buyers of services.

John L. Crompton, Department of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-2261; jcrompton@tamu.edu