

A conversation with David Bier, June 5, 2015

Participants

- David Bier – Immigration Policy Analyst, Niskanen Center
- Alexander Berger – Program Officer, US Policy, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by David Bier.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with David Bier of the Niskanen Center (Niskanen), a libertarian think tank, as part of its shallow investigation into labor mobility. Conversation topics included legal immigration of less-skilled workers, Niskanen's work to increase immigration through research and promoting policy reform, what Niskanen would do with additional resources, and other organizations working on this issue.

Mr. Bier's work experience

Mr. Bier previously worked as an Immigration Policy Analyst for the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), another libertarian think tank, and for Congressman Raúl Labrador, who was part of the House Gang of Eight working on comprehensive immigration reform. Mr. Bier wanted to continue this work in order to promote the view that an increase in immigration would be good for the US and that Americans should not fear immigration. This led him to join Niskanen in February of this year.

Legal immigration channels for less-skilled workers

Under existing immigration laws, there are several legal channels through which less-skilled workers can come to the US:

- Temporary (H-2) work visas
- Family-based immigration
- Diversity Visa lottery
- Refugee visas

Opposition to legal immigration

Legal immigration channels, particularly work visas, face a lot of opposition. Labor unions, for example, are opposed to work visas. Much of the opposition to other immigration reforms comes from congressional committee members and their staff, but Mr. Bier is not aware of anyone who is engaging with these individuals' legitimate concerns to come up with immigration laws that are mutually satisfactory.

Opponents of work-based immigration fear immigration because they believe that there has been little wage growth in the US due to an influx of low-wage workers beginning in the 1970s or 1980s. They argue that immigration of less-skilled workers drives down wages by increasing the supply of workers.

Economic case for increased immigration

While working as a congressional staffer, Mr. Bier researched this argument by looking at the rate of growth of the workforce from 1947 to 1980 and from 1980 to 2013. Contrary to the assumption that there has been a surge of growth since 1980 as a result of immigration, what he found was that the rate of workforce growth has fallen significantly in spite of immigration. This is in part because domestic birth rates declined after the baby boom, and in part because fewer women entered the workforce after 1980 than before. In addition to the drop in growth of the workforce as a whole, there has been a 70% drop in growth of less-educated, less-skilled workers since 1980. This has left a gap that guest workers can help to fill.

Niskanen's work on immigration reform

Niskanen is working to increase immigration to the US as part of an overall goal to increase human liberty. It believes that protecting individual rights and liberties should be the highest goal of government, and that liberty should not be denied without good reason. In the case of immigration, this means that anyone who does not pose a serious threat to the safety or health of Americans should be allowed to come to the US and work legally. Niskanen holds that anything that increases the opportunity for immigrants to come to the US increases human freedom.

In addition to the current legal channels through which less-skilled workers can come to the US, Niskanen supports the use of dual intent work visas because they reduce illegal immigration.

Original research

Niskanen does original research on population and immigration issues, through which it hopes to demonstrate that immigration should not be feared but encouraged.

Promoting policy reform

Mr. Bier does not expect significant reforms to be passed before 2017, but there are other current opportunities to work on this issue. Niskanen has proposed and promoted several limited reforms, which it hopes might end up being part of a package that is eventually passed in 2017.

Guest workers

Making more temporary work visas available to less-skilled guest workers would reduce illegal immigration and increase growth in the less-skilled sector of the workforce.

State-based immigration quotas

Giving states more power to decide how many work visas to grant may increase competition for labor between states, which would make each state more likely to increase its immigration quotas. This would lead to a gradual increase in the total number of immigrants admitted to the US. Several states have indicated that they would be in favor of

this if the federal government were to allow it. Laws have been passed in Colorado and Georgia, and senate committees in Arizona and Texas explored possibilities in this area.

Although there is little federal support for state-based immigration quotas, this issue could be presented to the congressional representatives of these states as something that would help their states achieve their goals. An argument couched in terms of states' self-interest could be more viable in Congress than a simple plea to work on immigration reform. The states' work on introducing legislation would demonstrate to Congress that this idea already has some support.

Many congressional representatives previously worked in state legislatures, and may also have personal relationships with the legislators who introduced these bills. These personal relationships may be advantageous in getting federal approval of state-based immigration quotas.

While several states are beginning to show their support, it is difficult to find groups to take up this cause. There are not many people promoting the idea of state-based immigration quotas, and Mr. Bier is not aware of anyone in Washington, D.C. promoting the idea of following the states' lead on immigration reform. Niskanen has begun working to fill this gap.

Diversity Visa lottery

Niskanen works to protect the Diversity Visa lottery, which is the primary channel through which workers come to the US from many low-income countries. The lottery system awards green cards to immigrants primarily from poor countries in Africa and Asia.

Mr. Bier is working to find a politically palatable replacement to the Diversity Visa program.

How Niskanen would use additional resources

Engage regularly with Congress on legislation

When asked what he would do with additional resources, Mr. Bier said he would like to stay more up to date on all of the work being done on immigration reform in Washington, D.C., and increase Niskanen's engagement with members of Congress and their staff. He would like to engage with Congress on the specifics of policy being debated, including arguments for and against it, the specific reform that Niskanen would like to see, and the specific legislative language needed to get reform passed.

Currently Mr. Bier is not aware of anyone who represents Niskanen's perspective on immigration regularly engaging with members of Congress on legislation. Congress currently gets its information on pieces of legislation from interest groups, businesses, and staff of congressional committees, who do not share Niskanen's interest in advancing human liberty and freedom of movement.

Hire another staffer

Mr. Bier said that there is more work to do than he can accomplish alone, and hiring another staffer would be helpful. He does not already know the person he would like to hire, but he does not think it should be particularly difficult to find a good fit.

Work to increase the limit on refugee visas

Mr. Bier is interested in working to convince the President to increase the number of refugee visas granted in the US. The President sends a proposal to Congress every year suggesting a limit on refugee visas for the coming year, which is usually accepted without substantial debate. This puts the President in a strong position to affect change in this area.

A member of the administration has expressed interest in working on this, but is concerned both because there is no political constituency for refugees, and because refugees receive welfare (including food stamps and/or Medicaid), and there is not enough funding to support a big increase in refugee admissions. When Mr. Bier suggested that all additional refugees over the current limit not be given welfare, the member of the administration responded that this is not feasible because Democrats, who are most likely to vote in favor of increasing the limit, would be unlikely to support a policy that denies refugees welfare. With more time and resources, Mr. Bier would like to work on finding a way to increase the number of refugees without spending a lot of additional money on welfare.

Challenges to immigration reform

Many people are currently interested in immigration reform, but there is no unified agenda guiding progress in this area, and it can be difficult to find new ways to advance this cause. Important actors including the Chamber of Commerce are working on this issue, but each has its own agenda and perspective on how to best reform immigration law. In light of these divisions, Mr. Bier thinks that in order to make the most of Niskanen's current allies, it will be necessary to bring coalitions together in novel ways to get these various groups to work toward a common goal. It is important to have coalition partners to help defend Niskanen's position on specific issues.

*All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at
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