

Republican Snyder Woos Immigrants to Refill Depopulated Michigan

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By Chris Christoff

Jan. 11 (Bloomberg) -- Michigan Governor Rick Snyder calls himself the most pro-immigration governor in the country, and he's out to prove it.

Other Republican governors in Arizona, Alabama and South Carolina are embroiled in political tumult over their efforts to weed out illegal immigrants. Snyder assigned agencies to woo educated immigrants to the only state that lost population in the 2010 U.S. census. He's called well-educated, skilled foreigners crucial to building Michigan's economy.

"I view it as education, to explain the facts to people," Snyder said in an interview at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit yesterday. "They're not taking jobs, they're creating jobs."

Snyder, 53, a former venture capitalist and chairman of computer maker Gateway Inc., wants Congress to ease the entry of people with advanced degrees, especially in science and technical fields, and newly minted foreign graduates to work in the U.S. The first-term governor's public embrace of immigrants is an anomaly in a party more often associated with arguments for Mexican border fences and deportations.

"It's a pleasant surprise," said Nick Schulz, DeWitt Wallace fellow at the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy and Research, which advocates free markets. Schulz said he was unaware of other governors so publicly pushing such moves. Schulz advocates the same changes as Snyder, which he said are stymied because legal immigration is politically enmeshed with illegal.

"It's a tough issue for Republicans," Schulz, 39, said in a telephone interview. "You have to have somebody who's making the case. Too often immigrants are a lumped mass."

Send Us Scientists

Embracing skilled immigrants is a common stance among Republicans, Schulz said, including presidential candidates Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum. However, presidential candidates have hammered at illegal residents without making much of immigration's upside, Schulz said.

The governor says immigrants should get green cards if they can pay \$500,000 to start a business and create five jobs. The current requirement is \$1 million and 10 jobs, or \$500,000 in depressed areas.

He says Congress should eliminate the 20,000 annual limit on H-1B work visas for those with advanced degrees from U.S. universities. He wants to raise the 65,000 annual cap on H-1B visas for others.

Math Multiplier

A study sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Partnership for a New American Economy, a New York-based coalition of mayors and business people who advocate more opportunities for immigrants, found that hiring foreigners with advanced degrees from U.S. universities increases employment for natives.

That is especially true of immigrants who studied science, technology, engineering and mathematics, according to the report. For every 100 such foreign workers added to the workforce, 262 jobs were created for U.S. natives during 2000-2007, according to the report released last month. The report said immigration had no effect on employment for U.S. natives.

That's disputed by the Federation for American Immigration Reform based in Washington, which says many U.S. citizens with technical and scientific degrees pursue other careers because foreigners have driven down wages, said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman.

Cracking Down

A November FAIR report cites data that show no shortage of U.S.-born students with technical degrees. It notes a 2003 federal survey in which six unnamed employers said H-1B workers would work for less than U.S.-born candidates.

Such arguments don't sway Snyder.

"I'm happy to be out in front," he said yesterday. "Michigan can be a leader in doing this."

Snyder's open arms contrast with Republicans who took hard-line stands.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer in 2010 signed a law requiring immigrants to carry documentation, and which requires police to check the status of anyone they suspect is in the country illegally. The U.S. Supreme Court will hear a legal challenge in April.

In Alabama, Governor Robert Bentley signed a law more sweeping than Arizona's. That measure, also challenged in court, spurred legal and illegal immigrants to flee, and in November a German executive of Daimler AG's Mercedes-Benz was arrested while driving a rental car without a driver's license.

Parts of similar laws in Georgia and Indiana have been suspended by courts.

Founded by Foreigners

Snyder has opposed legislation in Michigan patterned after Arizona's. In a Dec. 1 message on the state workforce, he highlighted legal immigrants, saying they founded one-third of the new high-tech businesses in Michigan during 1995-2005. They started some of state's large companies such as Dow Chemical Co. in Midland, the Grand Rapids-based grocer Meijer Inc. and Masco Co. of Taylor, which makes bathroom and kitchen fixtures.

The governor's Global Michigan Initiative seeks to attract foreign-born workers with advanced degrees as well as seasonal agricultural help and people who want to start businesses, said Maria Nevai, the program manager.

Snyder safely can call himself pro-immigration because in Michigan, which borders Canada, the issue doesn't evoke alarm as it does in Southern states, said Bill Ballenger, publisher of Inside Michigan politics, a Lansing newsletter. Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants are accepted, he said.

Easy Stand

"There's no great outcry about it," Ballenger said. "He's being politically adroit. He makes it seem like he's more expansively accepting of immigrants than he probably is."

The Detroit metropolitan area has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the U.S., an estimated 300,000, according to the Washington-based Arab American Institute Foundation. The largest group of newcomers in the past five years is from India, said Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit, a nonprofit-funded study of the effects of immigration. In the past two years, more Iraqis have come than any other nationality, he said.

Tea Party activist Wendy Day, a 39-year-old from Howell, said legal immigrants are welcome but shouldn't take jobs from Michiganders. Though she generally supports Snyder, "If you asked me how to solve Michigan's problems, bringing in foreigners would not be on my list."

It would be for Rupesh Srivastava, 43, president and chief executive of information-technology companies Youngsoft Inc. and H2H Solutions Inc. in Wixom, a Detroit suburb.

Snyder's initiatives can create entrepreneurship, he said. It is often easier to find foreign-born workers with experience, he said.

"In all honesty, if people were available from here, companies would rather have them," Srivastava said.

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-01-12/republican-snyder-woos-immigrants-to-refill-depopulated-michigan.html>