

The case for regional immigration

A bold new proposal: send American newcomers where they're needed.

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The immigration bill just passed by the US Senate emerged from a long and difficult negotiation among legislators with very different ideas about how the country's borders should work. Whenever Congress tinkers with immigration policy—and nearly everyone agrees our system needs a substantial overhaul—lawmakers from parts of America where immigrants are widely regarded as job-stealers must compromise with their colleagues from areas where they are welcomed with open arms.

But as the House of Representatives works on an immigration reform bill of its own, some thinkers are calling for a radically different approach—one they say could take some of the pressure off our elected officials to agree on a single way forward.

What they envision is a new class of “regional visas” that would open up additional slots for newcomers but limit them to specific destinations within the United States, while giving state and local officials a role in deciding how many immigrants—and which ones—to let in. Under this system, states that want to attract more foreign workers could do so, and perhaps even target people with the kinds of skills and training that local businesses are looking for. Meanwhile, states that don't want to open the door to additional immigration could simply decline to participate.

“The idea is to accept that in a large country, local jurisdictions all have different needs, and they are highly specific,” said Demetrios Papademetriou, president of the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan D.C. think tank. That being the case, he explained, the federal government ought to “find a way for these jurisdictions...to do [some of] their own recruitment.”

For people used to thinking of immigration policy as a national issue, both in terms of protecting our country's borders and deciding who gets to cross them, the notion of localizing immigration may sound like pure lunacy. And so far, aside from an informal endorsement by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the regional visa idea hasn't made political inroads in the United States. But a similar program has been successfully adopted in Canada, where officials in each province are allowed to nominate a certain number of new immigrants for visas every year.

In the United States, advocates of a regional visa program say it would harness a global supply to meet clear domestic needs. Millions of people around the world want to move to the United States, and many parts of the country—especially depopulated cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh—would love to welcome motivated new residents. Adding some immigration on a

purely regional basis would loosen the restrictive system overseen by the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security, the argument goes, without forcing more newcomers on less welcoming states like Arizona.

“Right now immigrants aren’t directed to areas where they’re necessarily needed the most,” said Adam Ozimek, a widely read economics blogger and consultant. “Areas that have declining populations and vacant houses—they’ve got a stronger need for immigrants. So the hope is that the areas that need them more would be able to let more in.”

There was a time when pretty much anyone in the world could move to the United States without worrying about whether they had the right paperwork in hand. “We hold out to the people of other countries an invitation to come and settle among us as members of our rapidly growing family,” said President John Tyler in 1841, as the nation was experiencing its first massive immigration wave. Over the course of that decade, according to [a history of American immigration policy](#) by Roger Daniels, a total of 1.7 million people arrived on American shores; by the end of the next one, they’d been joined by 2.6 million more.

In 1921, the federal government passed restrictive new quotas placing country-by-country limits on the number of arrivals each year. The quotas, driven by nativist fears about the country’s demographic makeup, remained largely in place until 1965. That year, President Lyndon Johnson pushed through a law forming the basis of the system we’ve had ever since—a more open but labyrinthine one in which potential immigrants can apply for a wide range of different visas, each unique in terms of who is eligible and how many can be given out every year.

From the beginning, US immigration policy has been regulated in a highly centralized manner, even as the population has spread out and regional needs have shifted. This kind of one-size-fits-all approach means that a Chinese citizen who has been offered a programming job in Cambridge will enter the same visa pool as an Austrian linguist who has been hired to work in Silicon Valley. Most likely, both would apply for so-called H1Bs, which are aimed at skilled workers; the problem is there are only 85,000 of them available per year, meaning that once that national ceiling is hit—this year it took less than a week—people start getting turned away.

But what if that Chinese programmer who wasn’t lucky enough to get an H1B were willing to take a job somewhere else—say, in Baltimore—if it meant getting to stay in the United States? Wouldn’t it be better for all involved if the state of Maryland could sponsor him for a visa, thereby gaining a valuable new resident and saving him from having to move back home? That’s the insight at the heart of the regional visa proposal: If state and local officials could sponsor the people they want living and working in their communities, we would have a system more finely tuned to the country’s needs.

The idea has recently been proposed in several blogs and policy publications. In [City Journal](#), a quarterly put out by a conservative think tank called the Manhattan Institute, Brandon Fuller of the Urbanization Project at the NYU Stern School of Business and Sean Rust, a graduate of the Temple University Beasley School of Law, proposed a system in which

immigrants entering through a regional visa program would be required to purchase a home in the state that sponsored them. And Adam Ozimek, who has [argued](#) for the regional visa program on his blog at Forbes.com, suggests the visas could be auctioned off to the foreigners who want them most or distributed based on a state-specific points system that would reward people with certain skills. Utah, for instance, could give extra points to hospitality workers, because there's a labor shortage in the service industry there.

Regional immigration programs have sprung up in several countries, including Australia and Canada. In Canada, all 10 of the country's provinces are allowed to [nominate a certain number of people for visas every year](#), and to distribute them in ways that reflect the hiring priorities of local employers. In oil-rich Alberta, visa nominations are available to tradesmen, like pipe fitters, welders, plumbers, and rig workers; in Manitoba, immigration officials recently teamed with employers and other local leaders on a recruitment mission in southern Europe, where they looked for people who could work in business, transportation, aerospace, construction, and service. According to Daniel Hiebert, a professor at the University of British Columbia who specializes in immigration, the so-called Provincial Nominee Program helps spread newcomers more evenly around the country and provides a much-needed counterpoint to Canada's federal immigration system, which has historically privileged education attainment over specific skills, bringing in people whose advanced degrees didn't necessarily match employers' real needs.

Although the notion of regional visas has not gotten much of a hearing in American policy circles so far, it has been floated by a few local leaders. Michael Bloomberg suggested during a forum in Boston last summer that the government should "assign" immigrants to cities like Detroit, where they'll have the biggest economic impact, and reward them with citizenship after they've lived there for seven years. And last month, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder proposed [setting aside some visas](#) for people willing to move to cities that have suffered population decline. It would probably also enjoy support in cities like Baltimore and Cleveland, which have gone to great lengths to make themselves more attractive to immigrants, in the belief that bringing in people from abroad would create jobs and improve the local economy.

To see immigration the way it's seen in these cities is to take a growth-first view that not everyone in America shares. But the majority of economists who have waded into the debate over immigration policy regard the idea that more immigrants mean more jobs as an empirical truth. "When immigrants move into an area, they're not only producers, they're also consumers, and they expand the economy," said Ozimek. Even outside economics, research suggests that fears of immigration's harms are overblown: One exhaustive study recently suggested that immigrants, even when poorer than the area average, tend to be associated with a decrease in crime. Not everyone in America may believe that immigration is changing their area for the better, but the benefit of a regional approach, its advocates say, is that not everybody has to see it that way.

"It might be the most sensible way to tailor this massive issue, which can have really different effects in different states and different regional economies," said Steve Tobocman, the head of an economic development initiative called Global Detroit designed to serve as a "welcome mat" for immigrants.

For now, implementing regional visas in the United States isn't much more than a pipe dream: The idea won't be part of the current immigration overhaul, if such a thing even passes. But in a recent report published by the Migration Policy Institute, "Thinking Regionally to Compete Globally," Papademetriou suggests a way to stage a trial run: a pilot program in which the federal government would set aside a small number of visas in order to test the idea, without giving up any of its authority over the process.

"We're opening up so much to additional immigration at all levels in the Senate bill that carving out a number of visas—10, 20,000 visas—and authorizing the federal government to reach an agreement [with a state], on a pilot basis, to see how this works, is a no brainer," he said.

Even for supporters of immigration, a system that requires people to settle in a specific area can sound a little un-American: In a country that prizes freedom of choice, something just doesn't feel right about telling people they can come over under the condition that they stay in one place. "We just don't do that here," said Audrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who specializes in immigration policy. "If somebody moves somewhere, they are free to move anywhere they want, pretty much."

But advocates of the regional approach argue that it would actually be an improvement over the existing system, in which work visas are tied to specific jobs, making people dependent on their employers.

"Under the current employment-based visa policy, you effectively limit where immigrants can live anyway," said Rust.

Ozimek added in an e-mail, "There are often complaints of wage theft and abuse of H-2A agriculture workers because they are afraid to report the employers and risk getting sent home. Since regional visas only tie you to a region the potential for this is much lower."

Then there's the broader philosophical argument: that immigration policy is something a country must approach as one. But the patchwork of laws aimed at immigrants across the country—whether undocumented residents can get driver's licenses, or whether police can ask for papers during routine stops—already betray the fact that the United States is anything but united when it comes to this issue. A regional visa program creates a path through the thicket by embracing the simple fact that, though there may be 50 states, when people move here, they're only moving to one.

"What the voters of Arizona think is different than what the voters of Michigan think, and yet they both hold each other back from what they want to do," said Rust. "The region-based visa is a way to balance these political economies."

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/07/06/the-case-for-regional-immigration/CVNi9DUsxHPH64vZcWsWfJ/story.html>