Reforming Immigration: State-Based Visas

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A state-based visa program could benefit the economy and improve our immigration system, say Brandon Fuller, a research scholar at New York University, and attorney Sean Rust.

Recently, Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder proposed a regional visa program. Basically, the program would allow immigrants to live and work exclusively in one city by granting them a temporary work permit.

With a system like this, states would be able to manage the amount of immigration within their borders, and states that want additional immigration would be able to encourage it with these permits. States that do not want additional immigrants could choose not to issue any visas at all.

- Currently, employment-based visas restrict a foreign worker to a single firm. But with a state-based visa, permit holders could shift between employers within the state, and the visa holder could live anywhere within that state.
- States that need and want additional immigration would benefit from the influx of workers, improving prosperity, as they could recruit the workers that their state most needs.
- Allowing states to have more say in immigration makes sense, as it is the states that incur the costs and receive the benefits of immigration and who, therefore, understand the best policy for them.
- States could enter into voluntary agreements with one another to exchange workers. As agricultural work is seasonal, immigrant agricultural workers could work in California in the spring and summer and then move to Washington for the fall.

Creating a state-based approach to immigration is consistent with federalism and would direct immigrants to the states that most want and need the additional work.

Source: Brandon Fuller and Sean Rust, "State-Based Visas: A Federalist Approach to Reforming U.S. Immigration Policy," Cato Institute, April 23, 2014.