

A conversation with the Niskanen Center, July 22, 2016

Participants

- Joe Coon – Vice President, Niskanen Center
- Kristie De Peña – Immigration Policy Counsel, Niskanen Center
- Matthew La Corte – Immigration Policy Analyst, Niskanen Center
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- Will Wilkinson – Vice President for Policy, Niskanen Center
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Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Niskanen Center staff.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Niskanen Center (Niskanen) staff as part of a grant update. Conversation topics included Niskanen's immigration policy work, new social policy approach, and budget.

Immigration policy work

Approach

Niskanen is continuing to try to play an "inside game" on immigration policy. It aims to identify legislative allies, forge coalitions focused on achievable goals, and to be a helpful and credible source on immigration issues.

Focus areas

Niskanen's immigration policy work focuses on three main areas: humanitarian immigration, immigration from Mexico and Central America, and high-skilled immigration.

Humanitarian immigration

Within this sphere, Niskanen is focusing on refugee issues, as they offer the greatest potential for progress. Niskanen has been a champion of the idea of private refugee sponsorship, and has made considerable progress in drawing attention to the issue.

Immigration from Mexico and Central America

The regulation of U.S.-bound immigration across the Mexican-U.S. border is a pressing political issue. Niskanen seeks to rationalize the flow of Latin American migrants to the U.S., arguing that the influx of migrants will continue, that the American economy depends on them, and that the militarization of the border has caused a variety of security problems.

While prudent regulation of this immigration flow can achieve humanitarian goals by increasing migrant workers' incomes, Niskanen believes that it is more strategic

to focus advocacy on how these reforms benefit American security and the U.S. economy.

High-skilled immigration

This area is mainly concerned with reforms to the H-1B work-based visa for highly skilled immigrants.

Shorter term goals

Niskanen is tracking the progress of various legislative initiatives with an eye to potential areas for improvement. Other short-term projects include:

1. **Op-ed in support of Refugee Protection Act bill** – Niskanen recently authored an op-ed in support of the Refugee Protection Act, a bill which includes a number of innovative and promising reforms.
2. **Private refugee resettlement proposal** – Niskanen recently met with a member of Congress to discuss its proposal for a private refugee resettlement pilot project. Recent front-page articles in the Washington Post and New York Times on the Canadian refugee system made references to Niskanen. Niskanen hopes that the upcoming United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants will lead to further progress towards a private refugee resettlement program.

Longer term goals

Niskanen plans to focus on a number of longer term comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) goals, several of which might receive less attention from other actors. It hopes for a favorable reform environment in 2017.

1. **Procedural due process rights** – for example, increasing asylum seekers' access to counsel and documentation.
2. **Intersection of occupational licensing and immigration** – for example, anticipating states' attempts to regulate the immigration statuses of lower-skilled non-citizen workers.
3. **"Entrepreneur in residence" program** – Niskanen is currently working on an op-ed on this program.
4. **State-based visa reform** – Niskanen published a paper on this topic in 2014. Though states' ability to develop programs is largely dependent on the federal government, approximately 13 states have adopted resolutions calling for state-based visa programs. Niskanen plans to publish a new paper on these programs.
5. **Diversity Visa Program** – Niskanen plans to coordinate its efforts to preserve the Diversity Visa Program with those of Congressman Donald Payne's recently launched African Immigrant and Diaspora Caucus.

New social policy approach

Niskanen is currently developing a broader approach to social policy that brings together several of its focus areas. Rather than focusing exclusively on the utilitarian

gains from wealth redistribution, Niskanen's new approach seeks to emphasize the ways in which economic cooperation and a strong social safety net can promote economic growth and buy-in to economic liberalization, harness latent human capital, and drive long-term social welfare gains.

Budget

Currently, Niskanen's budget is almost \$2.4 million. Its funding base is relatively ideologically diverse. Most of the support it uses for its immigration program is unrestricted.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>