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The battle for the US presidency has ended, but a visa storm may be brewing — and scientists could, in principle, be among the beneficiaries. Early this month, US president-elect Barack Obama nominated Arizona governor Janet Napolitano to head the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees citizenship and visas. Napolitano has been a staunch supporter of increasing the number of H1-B visas, which are used to hire foreign information-technology specialists, researchers and other highly skilled workers.

Critics say that H1-B visas take jobs from US workers. Proponents say they help to bring in qualified workers unavailable in the United States. Napolitano will probably face questions from both sides before she is confirmed in her new post. Already she is on record saying she supports granting foreign graduates of US universities green cards after they pass a security check, which would eliminate their need to apply for an H1-B visa. If she is appointed, Congress, not Napolitano, would set the cap number for H1-B visas, which is now at 65,000 (plus 20,000 more for people with US advanced degrees). But she could push for a higher cap and systemic changes.

Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) is moving closer to its own version of an H1-B scheme: the 'blue card', which would allow highly skilled workers and their families to live in the EU for three to five years, with the chance of permanent residence after that. The European Parliament approved the plan last month and member states will consider it early next year. It aims to increase the EU's skilled foreign workforce, which is 1.7% of the employed population, compared with 3.2% in the United States, 7.3% in Canada and 9.9% in Australia, according to Ewa Klamt, a member of the European Parliament.

But entry is, of course, only half the battle these days, as jobs continue to be shed. US unemployment has risen to a 15-year high of 6.7%, according to a labour department report earlier this month. Unfortunately, any action on visas may be accompanied by a sad irony: Western nations could open their doors to more foreign researchers just when there is a dearth of jobs for them to do.

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