

California okays driving licenses for some illegal immigrants

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SACRAMENTO (Reuters) - California lawmakers approved a bill on Thursday to allow some young illegal immigrants who came to the United States as children to obtain driving licenses, in a move that could appeal to Hispanic voters in the heavily Democratic state.

The bill, which passed the state Assembly by a 55-15 vote before being sent to the desk of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, was introduced following the announcement of a federal program to relax deportation rules and grant some young immigrants temporary legal status in the United States.

"It is a victory for those who were brought here through no fault of their own, played by the rules, and are only asking to be included in and contribute to American society," the bill's sponsor, Assembly member Gilbert Cedillo, said in a statement

He added that he was confident Brown would sign it into law.

The bill's passage marks the latest chapter in a long-running national battle over how to handle illegal immigrants that has seen California's legislature emerge as a major proponent of integration into mainstream society of undocumented migrants who came as children.

California's stance on the matter has been in stark contrast with other states such as Arizona that have passed laws that sought to clamp down on such immigrants. California has the largest population of undocumented immigrants in the United States, with nearly 2.6 million at the start of 2010.

The "deferred action for childhood arrivals" permits shield them from deportation for at least two years so long as they were younger than 16 when they came to the United States, have lived in the country since June 15, 2007, and have not been convicted of a felony. They must be at least 15 years of age and no older than 30 when they apply.

As many as 1.7 million people could qualify for the program, which enables them to apply for work permits, Social Security cards and driver's licenses, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. But some states, such as Arizona and Nebraska, have said they would not grant benefits including driver's licenses to "deferred action" migrants.

California's driver's license bill had already passed the state Senate in a 25-7 vote on Wednesday.

President Barack Obama, whose administration has aggressively deported illegal immigrants with criminal backgrounds, said in June that he was moving to help this group of youth - many of them Hispanic - who have become increasingly vocal in calling for immigration relief.

Republicans have criticized the policy nod to young undocumented immigrants as a political ploy in an election year to help win the Latino vote.

Three U.S. states currently allow undocumented immigrants to obtain a driver's license: New Mexico, Utah, and Washington.

The bill follows a series of pro-immigrant measures passed by California in the current legislative session. California lawmakers have also passed an immigration bill that activists have dubbed the "Anti-Arizona" that would shield some illegal immigrants from status checks by local police.

Earlier this week, the governor also signed into law a bill encouraging state schools to teach the history of a post-World War Two guest worker program that brought close to 5 million Mexican agricultural laborers into the country over two decades.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/31/us-usa-immigration-licenses-idUSBRE87U08520120831>