

LOCAL / CALIFORNIA POLITICS

Jerry Brown OKs automatic voter registration through DMV

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Gov. Jerry Brown acted Saturday to increase participation in California elections and help prevent shootings at colleges, approving automatic voter registration and banning concealed weapons on campuses.

Brown also approved the nation's toughest restriction against the use of antibiotics in healthy farm animals.

Citing the need for a stable state budget, he rejected a raft of proposals that would have created new tax credits. Among them was a measure that would have helped offset the cost of seismic retrofitting of buildings unsafe during an earthquake, a priority of officials in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The record-low 42% turnout at the polls in last November's state election spurred legislation that will allow eligible Californians to be automatically registered to vote when they obtain or renew a driver's license at the DMV.

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The measure, which Brown signed Saturday with 13 other bills related to elections, permits people to opt out of registration if they choose.

The new laws will "help improve elections and expand voter rights and access in California," said a statement from Brown's office.

About 6.6 million eligible Californians have not registered to vote, according to Secretary of State Alex Padilla, who sponsored the measure.

"The New Motor Voter Act will make our democracy stronger by removing a key barrier to voting," Padilla said Saturday. "Citizens should not be required to opt into their fundamental right to vote. We do not have to opt into other rights such as free speech or due process."

Voting rights activists note that the registration gap is widest among young people. Only 52% of eligible

Californians between 18 and 24 were registered to vote before the last election, according to Emily Rusch, a voting rights activist and executive director at the California Public Interest Research Group.

The law takes effect Jan. 1, but the new registration process will not be offered until the state completes work on a new database. That is expected around June 2016, the time of the presidential primary election.

The bill's author, Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego), cautioned that registering more voters will not increase turnout unless candidates do more to engage voters.

"It's going to lead to millions more Californians being registered to vote, which means more people we can talk to," she said Saturday.

Brown also signed a bill permitting county elections officials to offer conditional registration and provisional voting at satellite locations during the 14 days immediately preceding election day.

The measure, which cannot be implemented until the new database is operational, is expected to make voting more convenient. Another new law allows Californians who vote by mail to drop ballots off at secure boxes to be installed at shopping malls, libraries and other spots before election day.

Other new rules require the state to pick up the tab for election recounts, rather than require candidates to pay for recounts they request.

Brown also took action, a little more than a week after a gunman killed nine people at an Oregon college, to prohibit the carrying of concealed guns on school and university campuses in California.

School officials may grant exceptions, and persons who are retired from law enforcement and have concealed-weapons permits are exempt.

Peggy McCrum, president of the California Chapters of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, supports the measure.

"California's college campuses and K-12 schools should be sanctuaries for learning, free from the fear of gun violence," McCrum said. The new law "will make schools safer and decrease students' risk of being injured or killed."

Some gun-owner rights activists have suggested that concealed weapons on campuses would provide an armed counterforce or a deterrent to gunmen like those who opened fire at Oregon's Umpqua Community College and in deadly shootings Friday at colleges in Texas and Arizona.

"This bill will put thousands of innocent lives at risk," said Brandon Combs, president of the Firearms Policy Coalition. "Criminals will know that their intended victims are totally vulnerable."

Brown also gave California a stringent ban on the use of antibiotics in healthy farm animals, addressing what he called an "urgent public health problem." The bill he signed also prohibits their use to promote the growth of livestock.

"The science is clear that the overuse of antibiotics in livestock has contributed to the spread of antibiotic resistance and the undermining of life-saving advances in medicine," Brown said in a signing message.

The governor also signed legislation intended to shed light on which special interests pay the travel tabs for elected state officials who attend annual fact-finding trips and conferences in Hawaii and other exotic locales.

Beginning Jan. 1, nonprofits that regularly organize and host travel for such officials that costs at least \$5,000 each must report the names of those who fund the travel. Disclosure is also required when the donor sends a representative along with the official.

The governor rejected nine bills that would have provided tax credits for lawmakers' priorities, including low-income housing development, energy-efficient appliances, small businesses, food bank donations and hiring.

Brown said there are new budget issues on the horizon because lawmakers failed to extend an expiring tax on managed healthcare organizations.

Without an extension, "next year's budget faces the prospect of over \$1 billion in cuts," Brown said in his veto message.

"Given these financial uncertainties, I cannot support providing additional tax credits that will make balancing the state's budget even more difficult," he said.

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