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Poll: More rights for immigrants a hard sell

Survey dealt with licensing, tuition

By ZACH PATBERG
and KIM PREDHAM

Proposals to offer illegal immigrants in-state college tuition rates and driver's licenses face an uphill battle in garnering public support, according to a Monmouth University/Gannett New Jersey poll.

Sixty-two percent of New Jersey residents oppose granting illegal immigrants some type of limited driver's license. Even when presented with counterarguments that the licenses would make the state safer and keep undesirable jobs filled, almost 90 percent of the opponents remained steadfast.

"I just don't think they (illegal immigrants) should have all the rights that legal citizens and occupants of the United States do," said David Mitchell, 58, of Point Pleasant Beach. "We have to follow laws. . . . If we're going to dismiss the law for them, we might as well dismiss all the laws."

Gov. Jon S. Corzine has called together experts to examine ways of integrating undocumented residents into the general population. The group, called the Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy, has reportedly considered the tuition and license ideas as part of an overall report that it delivered to Corzine last month. The report has not been made public.

Regarding lower, in-state tuition rates, 20 percent of residents favored extending the rates to illegal immigrants, with 39 percent saying the state's public colleges should shut their doors to the population entirely, according to the poll.

Just 32 percent said children of undocumented immigrants deserved in-state tuition rates.

"What this tells me is that this issue is a real hot potato right now," said Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute, West Long Branch. "It reflects the tough job you (the state) have to go out there and sell this to a public that is already not very supportive."

Brad Petersen, 45, of Howell expressed concern about the dangers of giving licenses to illegal immigrants, who he said might use false names.

"That would open us up to security risks," he said.

But Rita Dentino, a coordinator for the immigrant advocacy group Casa Freehold, said granting driving privileges could actually make the state's highways safer because there would be fewer people on the road without licenses, registration or insurance.

Karen Anderson of Brick agreed. Three years ago, her 17-year-old son was in a car accident in which the driver who hit him fled the scene and did not have a valid license plate. If the driver,

whom police believed was an undocumented immigrant, had been issued a license, he likely would have had insurance and his identity would have been on file for the police to track, Anderson said.

Instead, the driver was not caught, and her son had to wait tables for weeks to pay for the damage to his car, she said.

"It would be a safer and better situation for everyone," Anderson said.

As for the question of tuition, Dentino supported charging undocumented immigrants the same rate as other state residents for college.

"They certainly deserve a chance to go on to college," she said. "That way they will be productive members of our society."

Shai Goldstein, executive director of New Jersey Immigration Policy Network, a statewide advocacy coalition, objected to the poll's questions. He said they failed to reflect the complexity of the issues surrounding immigration.

"When you engage the public with simplistic questions that don't get to the heart of various issues, it creates a problem," he said. "There is a lot of educating that we in the advocacy community need to do, but these are not the type of questions I would have expected from Monmouth University."

Goldstein also criticized releasing the poll before the release of the panel's report.

Murray said a pollster's job was to ask the questions "*in the way the typical New Jerseyan sees them*." He added that the poll was not released until it was clear that the governor's report was not going to be made public in the foreseeable future.

A Corzine spokesman, Robert Corrales, had no comment on when the report would be made public.

The telephone poll was conducted from Feb. 2-8. It had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Gannett New Jersey newspapers are the Asbury Park Press, the Courier-Post, the Home News Tribune, the Courier News, the Daily Record and the Daily Journal.