

Date of Hearing: April 20, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Lori D. Wilson, Chair

AB 2196 (Ta) – As Introduced February 19, 2026

SUBJECT: Foreign driver's licenses

SUMMARY: Authorizes the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to waive the driving test part of an examination for a class C license for an applicant who submits a driver's license issued by Japan, the Republic of China (Taiwan), or South Korea under specified conditions.

Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Specifies DMV may waive the driving test if:
 - a) DMV determines the driving examination required by the foreign nation is substantially similar to the driving examination required by DMV;
 - b) The foreign nation, in a memorandum of understanding, extends the same reciprocal privilege relating to the issuance of a driver's license to a person who holds a valid California Driver's license;
 - c) The applicant has submitted a copy of the applicant's foreign driver's license and an abstract of the applicant's foreign driving record covering no less than the previous five years, issued by the appropriate government entity from the foreign nation and, if applicable, the English translation of the driver's license and abstract of driving record. Requires the documents to be notarized by a consulate general of the issuing foreign nation in this state;
 - d) Requires the applicant to be 18 or older;
 - e) Requires the applicant to submit satisfactory proof of legal residency in California; and,
 - f) Requires the applicant to surrender the foreign driver's license.
- 2) Specifies that an applicant may submit a driver's license issued by a foreign nation that is equivalent to a noncommercial or a commercial class A, B, or class C California driver's license, but the California driver's license issued by DMV shall only be a noncommercial class C license.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Permits a person over the age of 16 and is a resident of a foreign nation who possesses a driver's license from that nation to operate a motor vehicle within California without obtaining a driver's license from DMV for 10 days, or 30 days if over the age of 18. (Vehicle Code (VEH) 12503 and 12504)
- 2) Prohibits a person who is a resident in California from possessing more than one driver's license and further requires a person to surrender their driver's license from a foreign jurisdiction prior to being issued a driver's license from DMV. (VEH 12511)
- 3) Requires an applicant for an original driver's license to take and pass an examination which tests the applicant's knowledge of California's rules of the road, demonstrate their ability to satisfactorily control and operate a motor vehicle, and pass a visual and hearing exam. (VEH 12804.9)

- 4) Allows DMV to waive the behind-the-wheel portion of a driver's license examination if the department verifies the applicant's driving record from another state, territory, or possession of the United States does not have any stops, holds, or other impediments. (VEH 12804.9)
- 5) Requires an applicant to provide satisfactory proof of California residency when applying for an original driver's license. (VEH 12804.9)
- 6) Provides that an individual with a Class C license may drive a 2-axle vehicle with a gross vehicle weight rating of 26,000 pounds or less, a 3-axle vehicle weighing 6,000 pounds gross or less, a motorized scooter, or any housecar 40 feet or less. (VEH 12804.9)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS: *Who Can Drive in California Without a California Driver's License?*

Americans from other states and foreign nationals are allowed to drive in California without a California driver's license if they are visiting the state and have a driver's license from their home state or country. California does not require visitors from a foreign nation to have an International Driver's Permit (IDP), also mistakenly referred to as an International Driver's License, in order to drive in the state of California. An IDP is a document that translates individual's driver's licenses into 19 different languages and is often required when visiting other countries.

Once someone becomes a resident of California, they are required to have a California driver's license to drive in this state. New residents from out-of-state are required to take the written examination on the rules of the road and pass a visual and hearing examination to obtain a California driver's license. They may have to take a behind-the-wheel portion of the driver's license exam, but that exam can be waived by DMV if the department verifies the applicant's driving record from another state, territory, or possession of the United States does not have any stops, holds, or other impediments on their license. A licensee must surrender their out-of-state license in order to receive their California driver's license.

Foreign nationals, regardless of their country of origin, are required to take both the written and behind-the-wheel portion of the exam to obtain a California driver's license.

Other States. Thirty-three states and three territories have reciprocal agreements with Taiwan. Some waive the behind the wheel examination and others waive both a written examination and a behind the wheel examination. Over 20 states have a similar agreement with South Korea. Six states have an agreement with Japan.

According to the author, "California is home to large Taiwanese, Japanese, and Korean communities, yet immigrants from these countries face unnecessary barriers when building a livelihood in the state. One such barrier is the ability to drive.

AB 2196 authorizes the Department of Motor Vehicles to establish reciprocal agreements with Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, allowing eligible residents to exchange a valid foreign driver's license for a California driver's license. This bill reduces unnecessary barriers, streamlines the licensing process, and supports residents working to build their lives in California. California's current approach is inconsistent with national norms. Forty-six states have entered into reciprocal driver's license exchange agreements with at least one other nation, and thirty-

five of those states include Taiwan, Japan, or South Korea. AB 2196 brings California in line with the rest of the country while increasing accessibility for immigrants.”

Streets for All, *writing in opposition to this bill*, argues: “AB 2196 eliminates the currently required driving test portion of license exams for applicants with licenses from Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. It also requires said countries to have a reciprocal agreement with California in order to eliminate the driving test for said applicants.

AB 2196 does not account for left-sided driving differences, such as in Japan. The reciprocal program is also helpful for long-term residents abroad, however interim licensure provisions already exist in countries like Japan, where foreigners can use an IDP for 3 months to a year. In addition, road conditions in California can be vastly different from abroad, the driver’s test and the preparation it requires are vital tools in the acclimation process.

Streets For All is a street safety organization, we believe maintaining high standards of driving competency is essential to maintaining the safety of all drivers on our roads. Passing a driving test is not an unreasonable burden to the use of our roadways.”

Committee concerns. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, California is home to approximately 10.9 million foreign-born residents, representing 28% of the state’s total population. These residents originate from over 150 countries, with the leading countries of origin being Mexico (3.95 million), the Philippines (855,000), China (822,000), and India (626,000). This bill would create a tiered system where only a small fraction of California’s immigrant population is eligible for a testing waiver, while the vast majority, including those from our largest immigrant countries, must still complete a behind-the-wheel examination to ensure they can safely navigate California roads.

The Legislature may not be the appropriate body to determine which foreign jurisdictions maintain driving standards equivalent to California’s. By selecting specific countries for reciprocity via statute, the Legislature risks making these determinations based on geopolitical relationships rather than objective safety data. This could inadvertently place the State in the position of making foreign policy decisions that have broader implications for United States international relations.

Moreover, existing law maintains a consistent and fair standard for all foreign nationals: regardless of country of origin, new residents must demonstrate their driving competency through a practical examination. The Committee should consider whether it is appropriate to depart from this uniform safety standard to treat individuals from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan differently than the millions of other Californians who have successfully completed the state’s licensing requirements.

Previous Legislation. AB 723 (Low) of 2021 would have Allowed a person with a driver’s license from a foreign nation to be exempt from taking the behind-the-wheel examination when applying for a California driver’s license if the country formed an MOU with the State of California. That bill died in Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 269 (Quirk-Silva) of 2019 was sustainably similar to AB 723. AB 269 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 1360 (Portantino) of 2018 was substantially AB 723. SB 1360 was not taken up for a vote and died on the Assembly floor.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

None on file

Opposition

Streets are for Everyone

Streets for All

Analysis Prepared by: David Sforza / TRANS. / (916) 319-2093