

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

When did Iowa become a border state?

The answer would seem to be about 10 years ago. That is when the state began to experience a dramatic growth in its Hispanic population due to the arrival of thousands of immigrant workers, many of them in the country illegally. The newcomers were initially drawn to the meatpacking industry, where you find the sort of hard and dirty jobs that many Americans are not interested in doing at any wage. From there, the immigrants did what earlier waves of immigrants did before them - drifted to jobs in hotels, restaurants, construction firms and other industries.

Of course, the overall number of Hispanic residents in Iowa is still relatively small, but it's the growth in that population that has many people concerned. According to census data, the Hispanic population of Iowa grew more than 150 percent in the 1990s.

With those changes, a number of towns in Iowa are experiencing a change in their culture, and that is always worrisome to some people. In fact, it's that concern over the effect that immigrants have on the culture, not economics or border security, that drives much of the debate.

Just ask the presidential candidates in both parties. The Iowa caucuses are just a few weeks away and everywhere the candidates go in the state, they get asked what they would do to end illegal immigration. Good luck with that, folks. Here on the actual border, we have a more realistic understanding of the problem and what it takes to address it.

What the candidates should say whenever they're asked this is that Iowans played a big role in creating the situation about which they now complain, and that the best way for a community to take a stand against illegal immigration is to stop hiring illegal immigrants or turning a blind eye to those who do.

Beyond that, the arrival of the immigration issue on the Iowa political landscape also presents challenges not just for those running for president but also for those in the news media who are trying to cover the story.

For instance, one narrative you hear often is that the immigration issue is tough sledding for Republicans. That's true. But the issue is no less difficult for Democrats, who are trying to keep together under one umbrella supporters from the Hispanic and African-American communities, organized labor and liberals who, on this issue, sound like conservatives.

There is also an interesting wrinkle in the fact that two candidates who are doing especially well in Iowa - Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mike Huckabee - have what can be described as liberal views on illegal immigration, the very issue on which we're told by the media that voters are demanding a more conservative tone.

How about that? What in the world is going on in Iowa? Stay tuned. With the caucuses approaching, we're about to find out.

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