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By SCOTT BAUER, Associated Press Writer

Wed May 31, 5:42 AM ET

CRETE, Neb. - Forget the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

Nebraska natives, who have watched a steady flow of immigrants fill jobs at local meatpacking plants, increasingly oppose the new faces. And they are showing their opposition at the polls.

"It isn't so much that people don't like the immigrants or don't think there's a place for them," said Gary Pence, a 59-year-old Crete salesman. "It's just not that 'Leave it to Beaver' era we grew up in."

While the nation debates border security and the fate of 11 million illegal aliens, the farm town of Crete, population 6,000, is having a debate of its own.

Immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala have come to America's heartland for jobs at the Farmland Inc., meatpacking plant, working for about \$9 an hour slaughtering hogs, boxing frozen hams and pork chops and cleaning up entrails.

They send their children to local schools — which added seven bilingual teachers — and attend services at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, now offering Sunday Mass in Spanish.

In 1990, there were some 40 Hispanics in Crete and 10 years later there were some 800. Now, Rev. Julius Tvrdy at Sacred Heart estimates they probably number 1,700.

"The immigrants are having a positive economic impact on the areas where they settle," said Marty Ramirez, a community activist in Lincoln, Neb., 30 miles northeast of Crete. "Without them, small towns would be struggling."

Some disagree. A recent conversation between Pence and buddies over coffee at a Crete diner exposed raw emotions about how the nation should handle illegal immigration.

"It's so far into this that it's hard to straighten out," said Ken Henning, 78.

"I honestly think the only hope for Crete is if Farmland closes up," said Pence.

Frustration with immigration among native Nebraskans proved a significant factor in the May 9 Republican governor's primary and could figure in the Senate race between Democratic Sen.

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Ben Nelson ([news](#), [bio](#), [voting record](#)) and political newcomer Pete Ricketts.

One issue in the governor's race was legislation to make children of illegal immigrants eligible for in-state tuition at Nebraska schools.

GOP Gov. Dave Heineman vetoed the measure, saying it would give children of illegal immigrants a break that others did not receive.

Rival Tom Osborne — the legendary University of Nebraska football coach and three-term congressman — backed supporters of the legislation.

Heineman defeated Osborne in the primary.

Republican voter Stan Sipple of Lincoln, Neb., said Heineman's veto of the tuition bill sealed the deal.

"I believe it was a tipping point," said Sipple, 47.

Nelson, a moderate Democrat seeking a second term, has adopted a hard line on immigration, even opposing a bipartisan Senate bill with increased border security that also contains a guest worker program and a shot at citizenship for many illegal immigrants. His office says Nelson's own proposal would increase border security, but not include a guest worker program or a path to citizenship.

Republican Ricketts opposes amnesty for illegal immigrants but says they should be able to get residency if they pay a fine, go through a criminal background check, have a job, pay taxes and learn to speak English.

Nebraska is a solidly Republican state — [President Bush](#) won with 66 percent of the vote in 2004. Nelson's Republican colleague in the Senate, Chuck Hagel, was an outspoken supporter of the Senate measure.

Bush wants to send National Guard troops to secure the U.S. border with Mexico, but he also favors a way to citizenship for the millions of immigrants here illegally.

Nebraska ranks 34th nationwide in the number of Hispanics. Many live in Crete, Omaha, Lexington and other towns and cities with meatpacking plants. Between 2000 and 2004, the increase in the state's Hispanic population accounted for 70 percent of the state's overall growth. The number of Hispanics grew by about 26,000 while the number of non-Hispanic whites fell by 500.

Kirk Beekley, a 52-year-old worker at the Bunge Milling plant and a Democrat, feels the influx of Hispanics has changed Crete's character.

"While overall immigration isn't a huge issue in Nebraska, it imprints itself on people's minds who have had a greater influx of Hispanics on their community," said Beth Theiss-Morse, political science professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Some natives complain that immigrants have created problems in their communities, but numbers on education and crime in Crete suggest otherwise.

Crime remains virtually unchanged, with 194 crimes reported in 1995, and 201 in 2004, the most recent year available.

While the percentage of minority students rose from 5 percent to 35 percent in 10 years, Crete school superintendent John Fero said state aid covered the additional costs for bilingual teachers and other expenses.

The influx of packing plant workers has benefited residents financially. The district has been

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able to keep property taxes below the state-mandated level and four years ago persuaded voters to back a bond issue to build a new middle school.

Unlike other rural school districts, Crete's population has steadily increased about 1 percent annually for the past 20 years.

"I feel very good about our adapting to it," Fero said.

AP Special Correspondent David Espo in Washington contributed to this report.

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