

Economic Anxiety or Racial Resentment? An Evaluation of Attitudes Toward Immigration in the U.S. From 1992 to 2016 *

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Does ‘economic anxiety’ explain attitudes toward immigration or can we better understand attitudes toward immigration as a part of racial resentment? This is a long-standing empirical debate in immigration opinion research and the election of Donald Trump, who consistently communicated anti-immigration hysteria on the campaign trail, has only intensified the salience of this debate. However, any focus on this debate by reference to the 2016 presidential election will struggle to distinguish the relative effects of ‘economic anxiety’ and racial resentment. I help settle this debate with a battery of analyses on attitudes toward immigration across the American National Election Studies and Voter Study Group data, spanning analyses on immigration opinion for white Americans from 1992 to 2016 at levels as granular as the state and the ZIP code. My analyses are unequivocal that racial resentment is reliably the largest and most precise predictor of attitudes toward immigration. Further analyses and simulations from a cherry-picked model most consistent with the ‘economic anxiety’ argument show that a standard deviation increase in racial resentment is still a greater magnitude effect than all ‘economic anxiety’ proxies combined. I close with implications for immigration opinion research, given its increased salience after 2016.

Keywords: economic anxiety, racial resentment, immigration attitudes

Introduction

Immigration opinion research is no stranger to heated debates about what motivates attitudes toward the movement of people across national borders. There are multiple debates in this field but the biggest one might be whether there is a political economy of immigration opinions, consistent with economic logic about factor proportions and material self-interest, or whether immigration opinion is better understood as a function of cultural values, especially values of ethnocentrism, nativism, and racial resentment. The nature of this academic debate only increased in salience with Donald Trump’s election, giving birth to a heated debate about whether the anti-immigration hysteria that Donald Trump championed, and his voters ostensibly endorsed, is a function of “economic anxiety” about the nature of a changing economy in a globalized era or whether Trump and his support base are artifacts of a racial resentment that increased with Barack Obama’s election in 2008. Clearly both can be true, but proponents of both perspectives emphasize the relative importance of “economic anxiety” or racial resentment in explaining Trump’s election and, by extension, the anti-immigration turn in American policy.

Both sides of this argument ultimately talk past another, which is unsurprising since much of the focus is on Trump and the 2016 general election. Endless litigation of how the 2016 general election unfolded will no doubt result in evidence consistent with both interpretations of attitudes toward immigration, at least as they manifested in vote for Trump. This follows

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because racial resentment in the wake of Obama's 2008 election conditioned attitudes toward various aspects of American politics and society, even extending into the economy (Tesler, 2016). Further focus on whether "economic anxiety" indicators or racial resentment are "significant" or correlate with anti-immigration attitudes do not bring us closer to a resolution of a debate that should be more interested in relative effect sizes. Again, it should be unsurprising that both sides of this argument in the age of Trump talk past each other about whether we can understand anti-immigration attitudes as functions of "economic anxiety" or racial resentment.

This manuscript offers a resolution of this debate. I use American National Election Studies data from 1992 to 2016 and Voter Study Group data from Dec. 2016 to explore the relative effect of "economic anxiety" and racial resentment in explaining negative attitudes toward immigration. My approach here is exhaustive. I use the ubiquitous retrospective and prospective subjective assessments about the economy that appear in every long-running American public opinion data set but I also leverage the metadata of both surveys. This leads to additional macro-level "economic anxiety" indicators of unemployment rates and exposure to automation/outsourcing at the national-level as well as more granular levels of the state, the county, the core-based statistical area, and the ZIP code. My findings are unequivocal. Racial resentment is by far the largest and most precise predictor of an anti-immigration opinion in any analysis. "Economic anxiety" indicators are not as reliably statistically significant, nor are the magnitude effects nearly as large. Simulations from one estimated model deliberately cherry-picked because it was most sympathetic to the "economic anxiety" argument (Figure 5) show that the effect of a standard deviation increase in racial resentment on thinking immigrants are "mostly a drain" on American society is equal to every "economic anxiety" proxy combined and set to the conceivable max. Informally, my results suggest an ounce of racial resentment is worth a pound of economic anxiety.

The manuscript proceeds as follows. First, I begin with a review of what we know of attitudes toward immigration, first situating the debate with a perspective of how we can understand American immigration policy before placing scholarly debates about immigration attitudes in a current focus. Thereafter, I proceed with a research design to flesh out what amounts to an implied competitive hypothesis test about the relative effects of "economic anxiety" and racial resentment. I offer visual summaries of a battery of regressions—41 in total—to communicate the relative effect of racial resentment and "economic anxiety" in explaining immigration attitudes from 1992 to 2016. I close with some implications for how we can better contextualize this debate in the current political climate.

What Do We Know About Attitudes Toward Immigration, Then and Now?

International migration—the movement of people across national borders—is a divisive subject in the age of Trump, but any discussion of immigration should first anchor it to a discussion of why a rich country like the United States tailors its immigration policy the way it does. Refugees, a class of immigrant fleeing their home country to escape war or persecution, have at times been political opportunity for the United States wanting to use resettlement—and even immigration, more broadly—as tools to embarrass and destabilize communist governments during the Cold War (Keely, 2001). In essence, refugee resettlement and immigration can be useful national security tools for the United States.¹ Immigrants all told serve important macroeconomic and

¹This downplays the economic benefits that this class of immigrant can have in the United States. The Cuban refugee resettlement program played an outsized role in the development of Miami (c.f. Portes, 1987) and available

fiscal purposes as well. Immigration into the U.S. slows population decline, especially in Middle America ([Pew Charitable Trusts, 2014](#)), and it should be no surprise that immigration to the U.S. started to increase when the median age of the native-born population started to increase as well ([Ortman, Velkoff and Hogan, 2014](#)). The implication is immigration has been at least a partial stopgap to plug holes in the budget, prominently the Social Security program, as Baby Boomers started to approach retirement age in the 1990s (c.f. [Social Security and Medicare Boards of Trustees, 2017](#)). Moreover, immigration may refer to the movement of people across national borders but those people ultimately comprise an economic factor of production with clear implications from Heckscher-Ohlin. The United States excels at capital and its priorities emphasize maximizing that factor of production. The United States, by at least some measures, is deficient in low-skilled labor and uses immigration policy to import that factor of production. The canonical case in the U.S. is farm labor. American workers have routinely expressed an unwillingness for the grueling nature of the labor. In one case study in North Carolina in 2011, state employment agencies advertised 6,500 farm jobs in the state. Only 265 American workers applied for the position and only seven completed a harvest ([Clemens, 2013](#)). The H-2A visa program allows the farm industry to employ low-skilled migrant labor from Latin America to cheaply cultivate crops for American consumers and for export to foreign customers.

This glosses over that immigration is no different from any policy that creates “winners” and “losers.” Segments of the general population that stand to “win” from increased immigration will advocate for increased immigration. Groups that perceive “losses” from increased immigration will lobby for immigration restrictions and disapprove of a national policy that increases movement across national borders. [Facchini, Mayda and Mishra \(2011\)](#) connect this to economic sectors, findings that economic groups that value low labor costs (as in the farm industry example) can pressure the government for favorable increases in sector-relevant visas while economic sectors where labor unions are more prominent can decrease immigrant visas that concern their sector. There are cultural pressures as well. The presence of a larger share of co-ethnics and already foreign-born Americans can lead to pressure on elected representatives for increases in immigration levels ([Facchini and Steinhardt, 2011](#)) and nativism, a disposition that sees immigrants as threats to values and group status, has been a recurring problem in the American context ([Perea, 1997](#)). Both economic pressures and cultural pressures can even intersect. For example, [Peters \(2015\)](#) argues that trade liberalization after World War II led the business community to ease its demand on lawmakers for increased immigration to lower labor costs, which allowed politicians to be more responsive to nativist groups. All told, this classification into economic and cultural factors conditions much of what we know about the determinants of immigration policy and the correlates of immigration attitudes ([Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014](#)).

Researchers interested in the economic correlates of immigration opinion assume that attitudes about immigration reflect material self-interest and the findings that follow are multiple. The Great Recession generally decreased support for immigration, no matter if the hypothetical immigrant is high-skill or low-skill ([Goldstein and Peters, 2014](#)). White Americans living in areas with higher unemployment rates are more likely to favor immigration restrictions, at least when the survey prompt conditions responses toward “undocumented” or “illegal” immigrants ([Berg, 2009](#)). Survey analyses interested in this topic are faithful to the economic tradition, working hard to identify a respondent’s skill set and how immigration, particularly of low-skilled labor, may

evidence suggests this positive economic effect of refugee resettlement is generalizable to American refugees from other parts of the world ([Cortes, 2004](#)).

threaten their current factor income. They find that less-educated, low-skilled laborers (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001), unemployed respondents (Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky, 2006), respondents who self-identify as lower class (Mayda, 2006), and lower-mobility and lower-income respondents (O'Rourke and Sinnott, 2006) tend to favor immigration restrictions or express anti-immigrant sentiments in available survey data. This is generally received wisdom in the political economy of immigration opinion literature, though the Hanson, Scheve and Slaughter (2007) study stands out as a slight deviation from this approach. They argue that high-income natives may be less supportive of immigration, given the fiscal burden low-skilled labor immigrants purportedly impose on net fiscal transfers.

That these types of respondents “tend to” favor immigration restrictions or “may be less supportive” of immigration is a hedge because the effects are inconsistent across samples or over time. Further, the “fiscal burden” argument about concerns of welfare state burdens and tax hikes undercuts the implications of the labor market competition argument the extent to which rich and poor respondents alike are opposed to immigration, reducing the correlation between income and immigration attitudes to zero (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Tingley, 2013). It leads to counter-arguments that immigration attitudes are more a function of cultural attributes or attitudes. Hainmueller, Hiscox and Margalit (2015) make this point explicit when they report no effect of fears of labor market competition on attitudes toward immigration. They instead find stronger and more robust effects of education on attitudes toward immigration, identifying higher education as a proxy for a cultural value of tolerance (e.g. Citrin et al., 1997; Vogt, 1997) and not a simple proxy for a respondent’s skill level (c.f. Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). Researchers skeptical of the political economy tradition of immigration opinion research find stronger support for cultural and other attitudinal attributes that have no implication for material self-interest. These approaches are multiple but negative outgroup affect and resentment recur in important ways in immigration attitudes. Generally, negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities (Chandler and Tsai, 2001), beliefs about the centrality of the English language and Christianity to an American identity (Schildkraut, 2005), perceived cultural threat by the Spanish language (Newman, Hartman and Taber, 2012), and resentment toward immigrants’ perceived inability to assimilate or “fit in” (Schildkraut, 2011) better explain attitudes toward immigration than economic indicators.

This was already a lively debate in academia before both economic indicators and ethnic/racial resentment came to a head in the election of Donald Trump. Anti-immigration hysteria was a core component of Donald Trump’s campaign from the beginning, forming one of a select few themes during Donald Trump’s campaign for which he was ever consistent (Fahrenthold, 2015). Indeed, Trump began his campaign on June 16, 2015 by declaring that Mexicans were “rapists” and “bringing crime” into the United States, using a weak qualifier that “some, I assume, are good people” to offset previous inflammatory statements that Mexico is “not sending [people like] you” and not sending the country’s “best” to work in the U.S. These comments were a continuation of two factors. First, they built on a political ascendancy for Trump that effectively started with a “birther” conspiracy that Barack Obama, the first black president, was born in Kenya and not Hawaii. Second, it would situate Trump’s candidacy, and eventual election, in a white backlash to Barack Obama in which a racial perspective conditioned public opinion through Obama’s eight years in office (Tesler, 2016). The implication here is Trump’s election win and a perceived endorsement of the immigration restrictions that Trump championed is an artifact of an ethnic/racial resentment that also featured prominently in Trump’s campaign and

in the opposition to Barack Obama, more generally.

This focus on the conspiratorial race-baiting and anti-immigration hysteria of Donald Trump's successful presidential campaign belies there are important economic factors that coincided with Trump's win. The vote share for Hillary Clinton was well within orbit of what the "fundamentals" predicted. Weak economic growth suggested a "time for a change" election outcome was plausible after the Democrats had two terms in the White House, even if the prediction models gave Clinton a modest chance of victory (Sides, 2016). This says less about Trump, per se, and more about how weak economic growth may have led to a rejection of Trump's competition that represented the incumbent party in office. National-level unemployment had been on a steady decline since the Great Recession formally ended in the summer of 2009, but states with higher unemployment rates voted for Trump. He won 13 of the 17 states in which unemployment rose over the 12 months before the election (Sussman, 2016), an outcome broadly consistent with a claim from the political economy of immigration opinion that material self-interest conditions responses toward immigration and, by implication, support for anti-immigration candidates. The implication of this perspective is that the political economy of immigration opinion can do well to capture Trump's election win and the perceived endorsement of the immigration restrictions that Trump championed as a consistent feature of his campaign. An individual's attitude in support of immigration restrictions comes from "economic anxiety" about the future of the American economy, reflecting retrospective economic assessments and indicators and prospective worries about an individual's material self-interest.

This constitutes arguably the most heated debate about how to understand Trump's election win in light of the clear race-baiting and anti-immigration hysteria in his campaign. Is his win and anti-immigration policies the culmination of decades of racial resentment manifested in a candidate who stripped his policies of any traditional GOP subtext? Or does Trump reflect "economic anxiety" about the future of the economy in a globalized era in which anti-immigration attitudes and votes reflect material self-interest consistent with the political economy of immigration attitudes? *FiveThirtyEight* may have taken the mantle as the journalistic outlet most sympathetic to the "economic anxiety" argument, publishing articles that highlighted how well Trump performed in areas where unemployment was higher, where the local economy was more vulnerable to automation and outsourcing, where disability payments were higher and more plentiful, and where there were more subprime loans (e.g. Kolko, 2016; Casselman, 2017). *FiveThirtyEight* was not alone in these assessments as outlets like *Vox* (e.g. Roberts, 2015) and *NBC News* (West, 2018), among others, ran similar stories to put an economic anxiety argument at least on equal footing with arguments that drew attention to the racial and nativist paranoia Trump championed. Other media outlets mimic this argument that "economic anxiety" motivates Trump supporters and, by extension, their attitudes toward immigration in their "Trump Country" profiles. This journalistic genre, which has increased in popularity after Trump's election, involves visits from reporters at prestigious outlets like the *Associated Press* (e.g. Galofaro, 2017) and *New York Times* (e.g. Kaplan, 2016) to "Trump Country"—i.e. rural counties in a select group of states, usually Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, or West Virginia—to profile Trump voters and allow them to explain, in their own words, how their gloomy economic assessments motivated their Trump vote in 2016 and motivates their continued support for Trump.

These "economic anxiety" arguments and "Trump Country" profiles have led to vigorous retorts from journalists and academics who contend racial resentment played a far greater role in Trump's campaign success (e.g. Lopez, 2017; Green, 2017; Cohen et al., 2017) and the desirability

of his anti-immigration messaging. They start by noting that individual-level assessments of “economic anxiety” are more anecdotal than a general trend; financially troubled white working-class voters preferred Clinton to Trump in the 2016 election (Cox, Lienesch and Jones, 2017). Instead, survey data show that the “anxiety” was more cultural than economic. Respondents were more likely to express anti-immigration attitudes, and, by extension, were more likely to support Trump, as they felt that “things have changed so much” that they felt “like a stranger” in their own country. Other retorts are more specific, drawing attention to the centrality of outright racism in the 2016 presidential election (e.g. Schaffner, MacWilliams and Nteta, N.d.). Similar questions, when narrowed to explaining vote choice in 2016, find far greater effects of racial resentment than proxies for economic anxiety (Riley and Peterson, 2016).

The evidence as it pertains to the current moment seems to give greater weight to the role of racial resentment in explaining Trump’s win and the apparent endorsement of his anti-immigration platform that came with it. However, difficulties persist. For one, the focus on the 2016 presidential election, no matter its salience, is going to run into difficulty isolating spillover from racial resentment into “economic anxiety.” Tesler’s (2016) analysis implies that racial resentment in the white backlash to Barack Obama motivated the economic anxiety that respondents reported. Resentment toward the presence of ethnic/racial others, prominently in the White House, led white Americans to become more pessimistic about the trajectory of the economy and even past performances. Thus, a focus on the 2016 presidential election may lead to endless litigation about “economic anxiety” and racial resentment in explaining attitudes toward immigration the extent to which both began to overlap after Obama’s 2008 election and survey data would yield evidence consistent with both hypotheses if the focus were on individual-level assessments of the economy.

I will ultimately offer an empirical assessment of this debate with an analysis of immigration opinions in the American National Election Studies (ANES) data since 1992 and complementing it with an analysis of Voter Study Group (VSG) panel respondents from Dec. 2016. I will also address the potential spillover by leveraging the geographic metadata these surveys provide to incorporate objective economic indicators. However, the nature of this debate is one of competing hypotheses. Do cultural attributes better account for immigration opinions than the indicators of interest to the political economy of immigration literature? By extension, can we better understand the current political moment and its implication for immigration as a function of “economic anxiety” or a racial resentment that increased in salience and intensity after 2008? I will precede the analysis with a theoretical section that outlines the competing hypotheses for evaluation.

Economic Anxiety or Racial Resentment? A Competitive Hypothesis Test

This section will formalize the arguments that purport to link economic anxiety or racial resentment to anti-immigration attitudes. Each theoretical outline begins with a definition of the term in question as a first assumption in the argument. Thereafter, each subsection continues with the main arguments that purport to link the respective concepts to anti-immigration attitudes.

Economic Anxiety and Attitudes Toward Immigration

Economic anxiety arguments may invest more into the “economic” component of “economic anxiety” than they invest to the “anxiety” component. This means identifying a factor of pro-

duction (e.g. low-or-high-skilled labor), or activity associated with it (e.g. unemployment), and outlining the intuition to how this may manifest in anti-immigration attitudes. The “anxiety” component is often implied or supposed to manifest in the behavior it purports to explain (here: an anti-immigration attitude). However, the measures of what is in orbit of “economic anxiety” are almost always the same. These are subjective retrospective assessments of the economy, subjective prospective assessments of the economy, the respondent’s own economic condition at the moment, and the objective features of the broader economy in which present or past poor performance create pessimism about future performance. Thus, I define “economic anxiety” broadly, capturing subjective and objective assessments of how poorly an individual, or the individual’s community, performed in the production of goods and services in the immediate past and how pessimistic the respondent is (or could be) for future performance given past trends and present indicators. This definition is deliberately broad and all-encompassing, but offers at least a definition of the concept for operationalization in the research design section.

The “economic anxiety” argument offers two pathways from economic indicators and economic assessments to attitudes toward immigration, which are recurring arguments in the political economy of immigration literature ([Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014](#)). The first, the “labor market competition” argument, focuses on immigration’s hypothesized effect on real wages. The second, the “fiscal burden” argument, looks at immigration’s purported effect on public finance and tax policy. I elaborate these below.

The labor market competition argument builds in several assumptions, best articulated by [Scheve and Slaughter \(2001\)](#). First, current factor income is the income received from a factor of production (i.e. land, labor, capital) and is a major determinant of an individual’s material well-being. Second, and reasonably in the American context, individuals think that immigrants increase the relative supply of low-skilled labor in the United States. Assuming further from a Heckscher-Ohlin model that there is one national labor market for each factor of production and that sufficient mobility of natives and immigrants does not segment local labor markets, a large influx of immigrants decreases wages for native low-skilled labor and increases wages for high-skilled labor. This economic intuition informs hypotheses that look for a simple correlation between income/skill and anti-immigration attitudes. Low-skilled labor constitutes a segment of the native population particularly vulnerable to wage decreases following a large influx of immigrants and thus prefer to restrict immigration inflows for fear of how immigrants increase their competition for employment and high pay. This can be generalized to macroeconomic contextual influences, like higher unemployment rates, in which more people are actively looking for employment and immigrants will only increase the competition for scarce resources while also decreasing wages. The path from “economic anxiety” to anti-immigrant attitudes is channeled through a fear of labor market competition, reflecting material self-interest.

“The second pathway from “economic anxiety” to anti-immigration attitudes is through the purported “fiscal burden” that immigrants pose ([Hanson, Scheve and Slaughter, 2007](#)). This approach borrows several assumptions from the labor market competition argument, namely that current factor income is a major determinant of material well-being, and that natives think immigrants increase the relative supply of low-skilled labor. From there, this theoretical model explores what happens to net fiscal transfers received by natives. Assuming that immigrants use means-tested welfare programs more than natives, their use raises the demand for social assistance and the costs associated with these programs. States, in the [Hanson, Scheve and Slaughter \(2007\)](#) example, can offset these costs by raising taxes, reducing other transfers, or

borrowing. However, Vermont is the only state in the country without at least a constitutional citation or statutory requirement on balanced budgets, which reduces the options to some form of increased taxation and reduced transfers from other programs. This should be unpopular with higher-skilled and higher-income natives who are more likely to bear this burden through progressive tax-and-transfer policies. This argument is interested in individual-level preferences by skill and income endowment but it too is generalizable to macroeconomic contextual influences that should create more pessimism about the ability to accommodate immigrant demands for social assistance. The path from “economic anxiety” to anti-immigrant attitudes is channeled through a fear of the “fiscal burden” that immigrants pose, leading to more preferences for restricting immigration inflows and increasing the likelihood that immigrants are viewed as a “burden” or “drain” on society.

This leads to two hypotheses to test in the next two sections.

Hypothesis 1 *Increasing economic anxiety, broadly defined, is more likely to lead to an individual-level attitude favoring restrictions in immigration inflows.*

Hypothesis 2 *Increasing economic anxiety, broadly defined, is more likely to lead to an individual-level attitude viewing immigrants as a “burden” or “drain.”*

The Racial Resentment Hypothesis

“Racial resentment”, as concept, has a long history. The concept, as it was first introduced, endeavored to distinguish “old-fashioned” racism from a newer form of racism social scientists started to catalog in the immediate wake of the civil rights movement. [McConahay and Hough, Jr. \(1976\)](#) were among the first to catalog this “new racism”, calling it a “symbolic racism” in which white people viewed black people as violating core “values” by making “illegitimate demands” for revisions to the Jim Crow-era racial status quo. Subsequent refinements offered new labels of “modern racism” ([McConahay, 1982](#)) before settling on “racial resentment” ([Kinder and Sanders, 1996](#)) to highlight two important components of the concept. First, white people in the U.S. to whom this concept applied harbored genuine bitterness against perceived moral transgressions and value violations by black people for challenging the racial status quo during the civil rights movement. Further, the values and the prejudice are ultimately inseparable and white people to whom this concept applies use the language of American individualism to express their prejudice ([Kinder and Sanders, 1996](#), chp. 5).

By itself, the racial resentment of white people toward black people does not establish a connection between the concept and the outcome it purports to explain (here: an anti-immigration attitude). After all, African-Americans are overwhelmingly American citizens; only about 9% of black people in the U.S. are immigrants and most are Afro-Caribbean ([Anderson, 2015](#)). Thus, racial resentment’s path to an anti-immigration attitude ultimately rests on its connection to a broader perspective or outlook among white people toward various minorities, not just black people.

[Kinder and Kam \(2009\)](#) situate racial resentment within ethnocentrism, defining ethnocentrism an “us against them” disposition that reduces social life to ingroups and outgroups. Racial resentment toward black people, from this perspective, is part of a broader syndrome. [Tesler \(2016\)](#) provides further intuition to racial resentment’s pathway to an anti-immigration attitude, at least it pertains to current trends since Obama’s 2008 election. He argues that racial resentment

toward the first black president led white Americans to increasingly condition their outlook toward all Obama-era policies through a racial filter. What followed was an undeniable spillover of racial resentment to other policies, especially as they pertained to voters descended from recent immigrant groups (i.e. Latinos, Asian-Americans) that overwhelmingly favored Barack Obama to opponents John McCain and Mitt Romney. All told, this implies racial resentment, as we have been measuring it for the past 30 years, may be a prominent proxy for an overall antipathy toward ethnic/racial minority groups, as a whole. Attitudes toward black people also communicate attitudes toward other minorities, especially those descended from recent immigrant groups.

Racial resentment may be a prominent manifestation of a broader syndrome but the antipathies directed at black people are generalizable to other groups that emerged from post-World War II immigration and, thus, to immigrants themselves. All minority groups, from this perspective, are committing moral transgressions by challenging the racial status quo. African-Americans upset the racial status quo in the 1960s by marching for civil rights and voting rights. Immigrants upset this racial status quo with their simple presence, threatening to upend the racial hierarchy in the intermediate future by making the U.S. a “minority-majority” country (c.f. [Wazwaz, 2015](#)). The opposition to the simple presence of immigrants is routinely coupled with dehumanizing language that casts immigrants as animals, pests, or diseases, conditioning views toward the restriction of immigration as saving finite resources from being drained by their presence. This was prominent in the early restriction debates of the 19th and early 20th centuries (e.g. [O’Brien, 2003](#)) and it has reappeared in the age of Trump ([Utych, 2018](#)). All told, racial resentment as manifestation of a broader syndrome against non-white ethnic/racial groups suggests the following two hypotheses of how racial resentment influences attitudes toward immigration.

Hypothesis 3 *Increasing racial resentment is more likely to lead to an individual-level attitude favoring restrictions in immigration inflows.*

Hypothesis 4 *Increasing racial resentment is more likely to lead to an individual-level attitude viewing immigrants as a “burden” or “drain.”*

The next section outlines an empirical test of these competing hypotheses.

Research Design

I propose an empirical analysis of white American attitudes towards immigration from two prominent public opinion data sets in the United States. The first is the American National Election Studies (ANES) data, which has been reliably asking its respondents questions about acceptable immigration levels in the United States since 1992. The second data set is Voter Study Group (VSG) data. The VSG data set is a new addition to the catalog of long-running American public opinion data sets. Drawn from an original sample part of the 2012 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), the data represent a panel of respondents who have been interviewed five separate times between December 2011 and July 2017. I choose the December 2016 wave of the VSG data to include in this analysis for its proximity to the 2016 presidential election.

Dependent Variables

The ANES has an item on immigration that has regularly appeared in its surveys since 1992, appearing in surveys in 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.² The prompt asks, “do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased a lot, increased a little, [be the] same as now, decreased a little, or decreased a lot?” I recode this variable to be a 1 if the respondent thinks the number of immigrants should be decreased or decreased a lot. I code all other responses as zero.

The VSG data ask two questions on immigration. The first I use is similar to the ANES item. The survey prompt asks, “do you think it should be easier or harder for foreigners to immigrate to the US legally than it is currently?” The respondent can respond with “much easier”, “slightly easier”, “no change”, “slightly harder”, or “much harder.” I condense the ordinal nature of the data into a binary variable if the respondent thinks immigration should be slightly harder or much harder than it is currently. The second question is a much more aggressive prompt. The question asks, “overall, do you think immigrants legally residing in the U.S. make a contribution to American society or are a drain?” Notice the “legally” qualifier induces the respondent to think of those who migrated to the U.S. with proper documentation and are still residing in the U.S. with proper paperwork, discouraging the respondent to conjure undocumented workers as they answer the question. The respondent can choose a response of “mostly make a contribution”, “neither”, or “mostly a drain.” I code a 1 if the respondent thinks legal immigrants are mostly a drain on American society. I code all other responses as zero.

Proxies for “Economic Anxiety”

I use multiple measures to proxy “economic anxiety” that rely on individual-level responses coded in the survey data as well and also incorporate macro-level economic indicators that serve as contextual influences on these responses. The ANES and VSG surveys are not identical in their prompts but the indicators I select are largely similar across the ANES and VSG data. Table 1 will provide a summary of all these indicators in use and the components of “economic anxiety” to which they apply.

I include a dummy variable that codes a 1 if the respondent is currently unemployed, but seeking work (i.e. the respondent is also not a full-time student or, for example, a stay-at-home parent). Opponents of increasing immigration into the country often couch their opposition to a supposed displacement effect that foreign workers have on American-born workers with the implication that those who are themselves unemployed, but seeking work, should be more supportive of immigration restrictions as a result of their own uncertain work prospects. This question is identical across the ANES and VSG data.

There are two types of survey questions in the U.S. that proxy “economic anxiety” by reference to evaluations of the economy. These evaluations are both “retrospective” and “prospective”, asking the respondent if they believe the economy got worse over the past 12 months and if the economy will get worse in the near future. Both ANES and VSG have questions that proxy these retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy, though both are worded differently. In the ANES analyses, I create two dummies for if the respondent believe the economy got worse over the past 12 months and if they believe the economy will get worse over the next 12 months.

²The ANES did not ask the racial resentment questions in the 1996 survey wave even as it asked this question about immigration levels.

The VSG analyses include dummy variables for respondents who believe their personal finances got worse over the past year and if the respondent believes the economy is getting worse.

Table 1: A Summary of the “Economic Anxiety” Proxies Used in the Analysis

Component	Measurement
<i>Labor Market Competition</i>	Is respondent unemployed, but seeking work? (ANES, VSG)
<i>Retrospective evaluation</i>	Did the economy get worse over the past 12 months? (ANES) Did personal finances get worse over past year? (VSG)
<i>Prospective evaluation</i>	Will economy get worse in next 12 months? (ANES) Is the economy getting worse? (VSG)
<i>Objective indicators</i>	County-level Unemployment Rate (ANES, 1992-1998) State-level Unemployment Rate (ANES, VSG) National-level Unemployment Rate (ANES) CBSA-level Exposure to Automation/Outsourcing (VSG) State-level Exposure to Automation/Outsourcing (ANES, VSG) % of Tax Returns in ZIP with Unemployment Compensation (VSG) ZIP-level Average Unemployment Compensation (VSG)

I give the most attention to the objective, contextual indicators of economic anxiety because these should, in theory, be immune from potential spillover effects we observe after Obama’s election (c.f. [Tesler, 2016](#)) and should be, if the economic anxiety arguments are correct, exogenous to attitudes about immigration.

The objective, contextual indicators of economic anxiety importantly leverage the geographic and temporal metadata that the ANES and VSG data provide. The geographic metadata are the respondent’s home county and state in the ANES from 1992 to 1998, the respondent’s home state in the ANES from 1992 to 2016 and in the VSG Dec. 2016 wave, as well as the respondent’s home ZIP code in the VSG data. The temporal metadata are the the month of the interview in the ANES data from 1992 until 2008. Subsequent waves after 2008 resorted to more online polling, after which the ANES stopped making interview dates available.

I leverage this information in several ways. First, the county-level metadata from 1992 to 1998, along with the information about the month of the interview, allows for an analysis of the effect of the county-level unemployment rate on these responses toward immigration levels. I gather the county-level unemployment data comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and create four different measures for it. The first is just the county-level unemployment rate in the month of the respondent’s interview. The next three “economic anxiety” unemployment measures are the three-month, six-month, and 12-month differences in the unemployment rate such that increasing values communicate increasing unemployment rates over those periods and, thus, more macro-level “economic anxiety.”

I do the same with the state unemployment rate data, which again come from the BLS. This creates four variables for the state unemployment rate as well as three-month, six-month, and 12-month differences. Whereas ANES stopped recording the month of the interview after 2008, I benchmark these windows of time to November because all but one ANES wave asked these immigration questions in the post-election wave and, generally, the post-election interviews tran-

spired from November to January in the data.³ This makes November an appropriate benchmark in order to leverage these newer survey years for the ANES. The variable in the VSG analyses benchmarks to Dec. 2016, the month of that particular VSG wave.

The time-series nature of the ANES data creates variation across years for the effect of the national unemployment rate. I use national-level unemployment rate data from the BLS and again create four variables for the national unemployment rate and the differences in the national unemployment rate across three-month, six-month, and 12-month benchmarks. I use

Further, I include a more prospective nature of “economic anxiety” that looks at the vulnerability of a state’s economy to automation/outsourcing. This is of interest to the “job polarization” literature, which highlights how skills that can be easily be routinized are at risk for replacement by robots or outsourcing to countries with cheaper labor. I gather yearly state-level Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) data on employment size by sector and code an occupation category as routine, whether “cognitive” or “manual”, if the occupation is “sales and related”, “office and administrative support”, “production”, “transportation and material-moving”, “construction and extraction”, “installation, maintenance, and repair” or “farming, fishing, and forestry” (c.f. [Jaimovich and Siu, 2014](#)).⁴ I create a variable of the percentage of employment in the state in occupations that are easily “routinized”, a measure of exposure of the state’s economy to automation and outsourcing. The nature of the VSG data, which has the respondent’s reported ZIP code, allows me to use U.S. Census information to connect the respondent’s ZIP code to the respondent’s core-based statistical areas (CBSA). The OES data have employment sector information at the CBSA-level, which creates a corollary variable for the VSG analyses.

Regrettably, unemployment statistics are not as comprehensive at the ZIP-level as they are at other geographic levels. The American Community Survey has some ZIP-code level information about unemployment, but these are reduced to five-year estimates that are not that helpful for evaluating an “economic anxiety” argument at the ZIP-level.

I compensate for this in two ways. First, I leverage tax-return information from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which does have specific ZIP-level statistics. The VSG survey wave that I use was in Dec. 2016, which is eight months after the filing deadline for the 2015 tax year. The IRS records the percent of tax returns that had unemployment compensation and the average value of unemployment compensation in the ZIP code. I create four variables from this information. These are the percentage of tax returns in the ZIP code with unemployment compensation, the average value of the unemployment compensation, as well as the differences from the 2014 tax year to the 2015 tax year for those metrics. Higher values indicate more “economic anxiety.”

Racial Resentment

Scholars of race and politics in the United States are familiar with the long-running items on racial resentment that have regularly appeared in the ANES data since 1986 and also appear in the VSG data. These are Likert items that begin with a prompt, for which the respondent can

³The lone exception here is 2000, in which ANES asked this immigration question in the pre-election survey that ran from September to November that year. Thus, the benchmark for the unemployment rate data in that wave will vary by the month of the interview.

⁴The last category—“farming, fishing, and forestry”—is not typically included in analyses on job polarization, but [Kolko \(2016\)](#) argues to include the farming sector in considerations of exposure to automation/outsourcing because of BLS forecasts of employment declines in this sector over the next decade ([Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017](#)). I choose to do this as well because this variable played a large role in his argument that Trump’s vote share correlated with this measure.

answer that s/he agrees strongly, agrees, neither agrees nor disagrees, disagrees somewhat, or disagrees strongly. The four prompts in the ANES data are:

1. "Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should to the same without any special favors."
2. "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites."
3. "Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve."
4. "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class."

It is fitting that this racial resentment measure in common use today has a long history of revisions from McConahay and Hough, Jr.'s (1976) original "symbolic racism" measure because it is still the topic of an active debate for concern of how much an overall (non-racial) ideological disposition is part of this measure (e.g. Feldman and Huddy, 2005; Zigerell, 2015). This has led to a renewed interest in developing new measures—like "cognitive racism" or "empathetic racism" (e.g. DeSante and Smith, 2016)—that predict racism and prejudice, but not conservatism. Kinder and Sanders (1996) seem to acknowledge the two partially run together when they define "racial resentment" as both anti-black prejudice and the language of American individualism used to communicate a "new", more "subtle" racism. Thus, the proponents of the racial resentment measure never implied that this form of racism is explicit, like the "old-fashioned" racism from before the civil rights movement. It is instead the use of the language of "rugged individualism" to communicate a disbelief in structural inequalities targeted against the African-American population, manifesting in statements of resentment for the civil rights movement's challenge to the racial status quo. Thus, others are more sanguine that the measure of racial resentment the ANES has been using since 1986 can still faithfully capture the concept in question, requiring a couple experimental controls to confirm the validity of racial resentment as a measure of racial prejudice (e.g. Valentino and Sears, 2005; Rabinowitz et al., 2009). Feldman and Huddy (2010) argue that white racial attitudes cluster on three factors of overt racism, perceptions of racial discrimination, and a belief in the lack of black motivation. The latter two converge in the long-running racial resentment questions.

I recode the five-part ordinal scale of these responses such that all responses indicate increasing "racial resentment" in which a white respondent thinks black Americans do not deserve any special favors, are not trying hard enough, have not gotten less than they deserve, and disagree that the current plight of the African-American experience has anything to do with the legacy of slavery and post-Civil War discrimination. From there, I estimate an item response model that uses other responses on racial resentment items to impute a racial resentment score in the event that a respondent opted to not respond to one of the items after answering one or more of the other three items. This creates a "latent" racial resentment score for which the mean across all respondents is 0 and the standard deviation is 1. Higher values indicate more racial resentment.

Control Variables

I also include several control variables, most of which are identical across the ANES and VSG sampling frame. I include the respondent's age in years, whether the respondent self-identifies as a woman, and if the respondent graduated from college with a four-year degree. I include the

ubiquitous party identification variable in which the respondent places her/his partisanship on a seven-point scale from “strong Democrat” to “strong Republican.” The ideology variable will differ from the ANES data to the VSG data. The ANES data has a liberalism-conservatism index that the ANES combines from thermometer ratings for liberals and conservatives with higher values indicating a more conservative respondent. The VSG has a five-item ideology score from the political left to right with higher values indicating a respondent who self-identifies as more conservative. The ANES and VSG differ from how they code income. The ANES compensates for changing economic scales across the range of its time-series by coding ordinal income percentiles that range from the bottom-to-16th percentile to the 96-100th percentile. The VSG data, which is much newer, codes family income from less than \$10,000 a year (i.e. the bottom) to \$500,000 or more a year (i.e. the top). I compensate for the right-tailed nature of the data and the island response of “\$150,000 or more” that comes after “\$500,000 or more” (i.e. ostensibly to avoid self-selection out responding to the prompt) to create a maximum of “\$150,000 or more” in the family income variable.

Model Notes

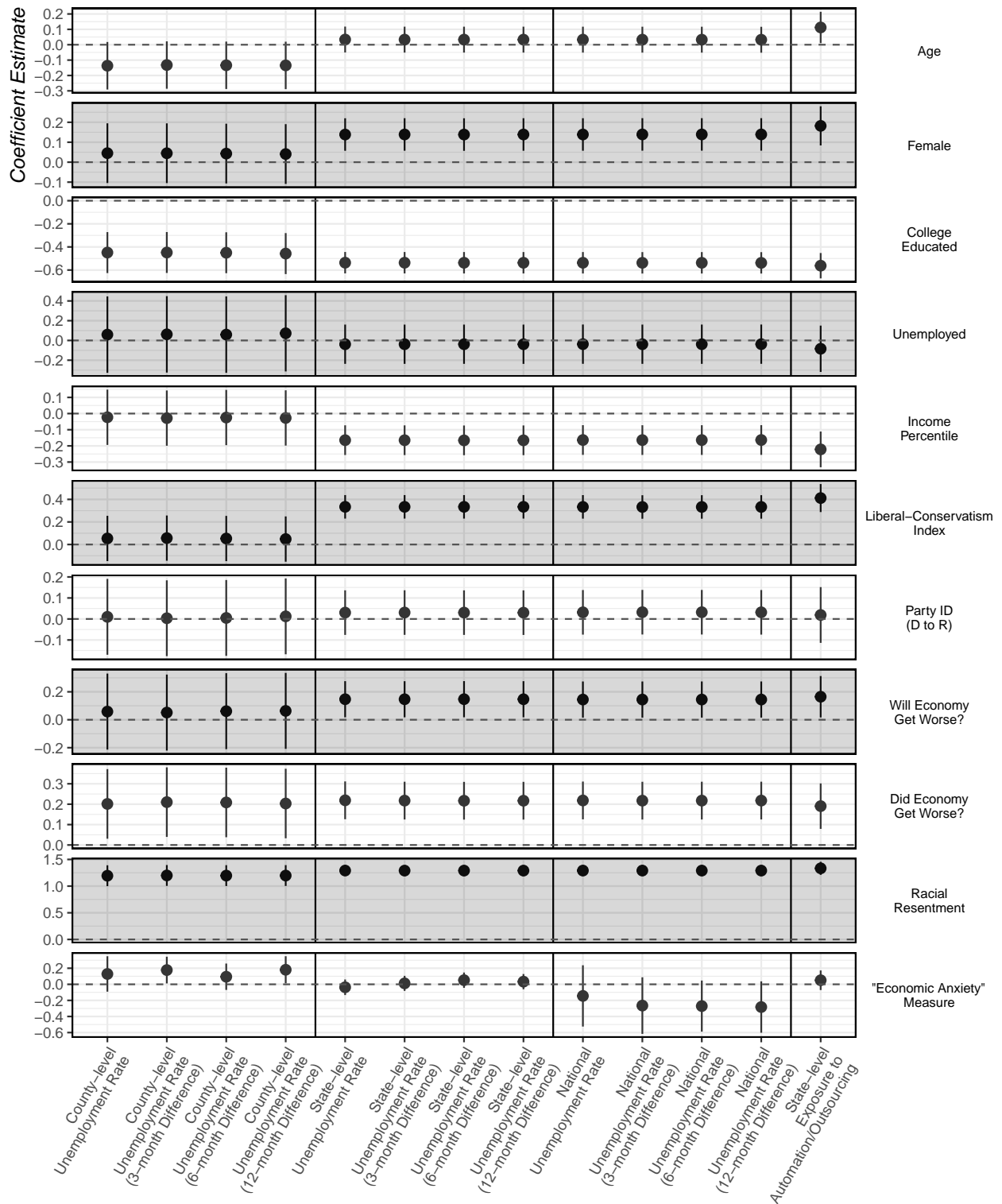
The analyses select on self-identified white respondents in the ANES and VSG data and takes additional care to model the spatial and temporal heterogeneity in the data. Thus, following advice from [Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother \(2015\)](#), I model the spatial and temporal heterogeneity in the ANES data with random effects for the state, the state-year (e.g. New York-2000, California-2004), and the survey year. The county-level analyses I conduct from 1992 to 1998 include random effects for the county in lieu of the state. The VSG analyses include random effects for state and the ZIP code.

Further, the analyses I propose here are also concerned with magnitude effects and effect sizes. These can be communicated with post-estimation simulation but regression analyses can give a preliminary glimpse of comparative effect sizes by scaling all non-binary independent variables by two standard deviations. This puts binary independent variables and non-binary independent variables on roughly the same scale, which [Gelman \(2008\)](#) argues has the added benefit of comparing effect sizes across regression coefficients in addition to being good practice in the mixed effects modeling framework.

Results

I am ultimately estimating and reporting a few dozen regressions that pit “economic anxiety” arguments against a racial resentment argument that proposes racial resentment is a more robust predictor of attitudes toward immigrations than any indicator about the economy. Thus, I report the first batch of analyses as “small multiple” ([Tufte, 1990](#)) plots in which the independent variables are on the row and the columns indicate the particular macro-level “economic anxiety” measure. The dots and whiskers communicate the regression coefficient and 95% intervals around the coefficient estimate. I include a dashed horizontal line at zero for which a whisker that does not overlap the line communicates a “statistically significant” effect.

Figure 1 communicates the results of 13 different models evaluating who wants to decrease the levels of immigration into the United States. The first 10 rows from age to racial resentment communicate variables that appear as is from one iteration to the next. The “economic anxiety” measure, reported at the bottom, will vary across models.



1992–1998. State and National-level unemployment analyses: 1992–2016. State-level automation exposure analyses: 2000–2016

Figure 1: The Covariates of White American Attitudes Toward Decreasing Immigration (ANES, 1992-2016)

There is a lot of consistency across the models in Figure 1, which otherwise vary considerably in the temporal domain of the analysis. Women are more likely to support decreases in immigration across the entire temporal domain from 1992 to 2016 though the effect of the female fixed effect is insignificant in the first four columns showing the county-level analyses from 1992 to 1998. The college educated are also less likely to favor decreasing immigration across all 12 models. Increasing partisanship with the Republican Party has no effect on attitudes toward acceptable immigration levels but increasing conservatism has observable effects across the entire range of the analyses reported in the last eight columns. Whereas the first four columns communicate analyses from 1992, 1994, and 1998, this discernible change in the size and direction of the regression coefficient for increasing conservatism suggests the effect of self-identifying as more conservative has stronger effects in more recent survey waves.

The primary concern in this analysis is the relative strength of the racial resentment hypothesis against the effect of “economic anxiety” proxies. The results summarized in Figure 1 provide some evidence consistent with the economic anxiety arguments but it is clear from Figure 1 that the effect of increasing racial resentment is much larger and more precise than these economic anxiety proxies. White Americans who thought the economy got worse over the last year were more likely to support decreasing immigration levels in the U.S. across all 13 models and the effect of prospective negative assessments of the economy increased support for decreasing immigration levels across the eight models that encompass all available survey waves between 1992 to 2016. However, the effect of these subjective assessments of the economy do not square with objective assessments of the economy. The 13 models I run and summarize in Figure 1 yielded only two cases in which increasing “economic anxiety” as objective contextual influence had significant effects on immigration attitudes. These were the three-month difference in the county-level unemployment rate and the 12-month difference in the county-level unemployment rate. These results are unique because the results elsewhere converge on zero effect and, in the four columns looking at the national unemployment rate over the range of the ANES data, the effect actually drifts negative. Increasing economic anxiety at a national level generally decreases the likelihood of wanting to decrease immigration levels. The z-value for the effect of the 12-month difference in the national unemployment rate is even -1.6, with a corresponding p-value of .109.

Contrast this with the effect of racial resentment, which is reliably the largest and most precise coefficient in any model in Figure 1. Table 2 shows this. Here, I select the four “economic anxiety” measures, i.e. retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, the respondent’s unemployment status, as well the macro-level “economic anxiety” variables. I also grab the 13 coefficients for the effect of racial resentment. I create pooled coefficient estimates and standard errors, consistent with Rubin’s (1987) rules for aggregating coefficient estimates and standard errors across, for his case, multiply imputed data sets. I report the pooled estimates and standard errors with the corollary z-statistics and p-values these would produce. Table 2 is clear that racial resentment has the largest magnitude effect, more than six times the size of the estimated effect of a negative retrospective evaluation of the economy. It also clearly has the most precise effect. The probability that racial resentment has no effect on attitudes toward decreasing immigration in the ANES data is effectively zero.

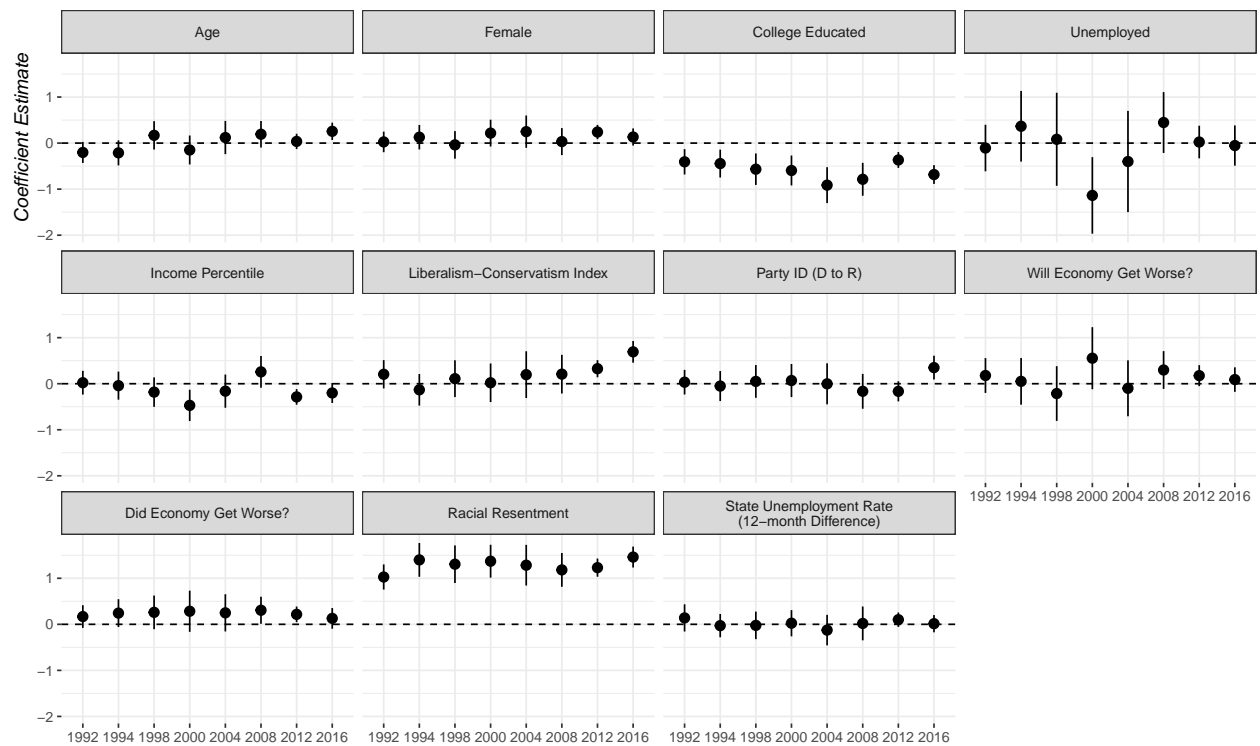
Table 2: Pooled Coefficients and Standard Errors of ‘Economic Anxiety’ and Racial Resentment on Attitudes Toward Immigration in the ANES Data

Variable	Avg. Estimate	Pooled S.E.	z-statistic	p-value
Unemployed	-0.010	0.156	-0.067	0.928
Will Economy Get Worse?	0.120	0.110	1.099	0.266
Did Economy Get Worse?	0.212	0.066	3.208	0.001
‘Economic Anxiety’ Unemployment Measure	-0.021	0.217	-0.096	0.905
Racial Resentment	1.265	0.091	13.903	0.000

A “secret weapon” plot will communicate a similar story. “Secret weapon” is shorthand for a dot-and-whisker plot that summarizes multiple models that can better visualize time trends that would be lost if the data were pooled or even partially pooled (i.e. as a mixed effects model) (Gelman, 2005). Here, this means running a series of models for each year in the ANES data, selecting the 12-month difference in the state unemployment rate as a measure of “economic anxiety” (i.e. it had the lowest p -value of any of the models from Figure 1 in which the coefficient was also positive), and including a random effect for the respondent’s home state. The results demonstrate a clear magnitude effect of racial resentment that is greater and more precise than any of the “economic anxiety” proxies. Only the retrospective economic evaluations variable has positive and significant effects on favoring a decrease in immigration levels among these “economic anxiety” proxies, but these significant effects come only in the 2008 and 2012 waves. The effect is curiously insignificant in 2016 for the election of Donald Trump.

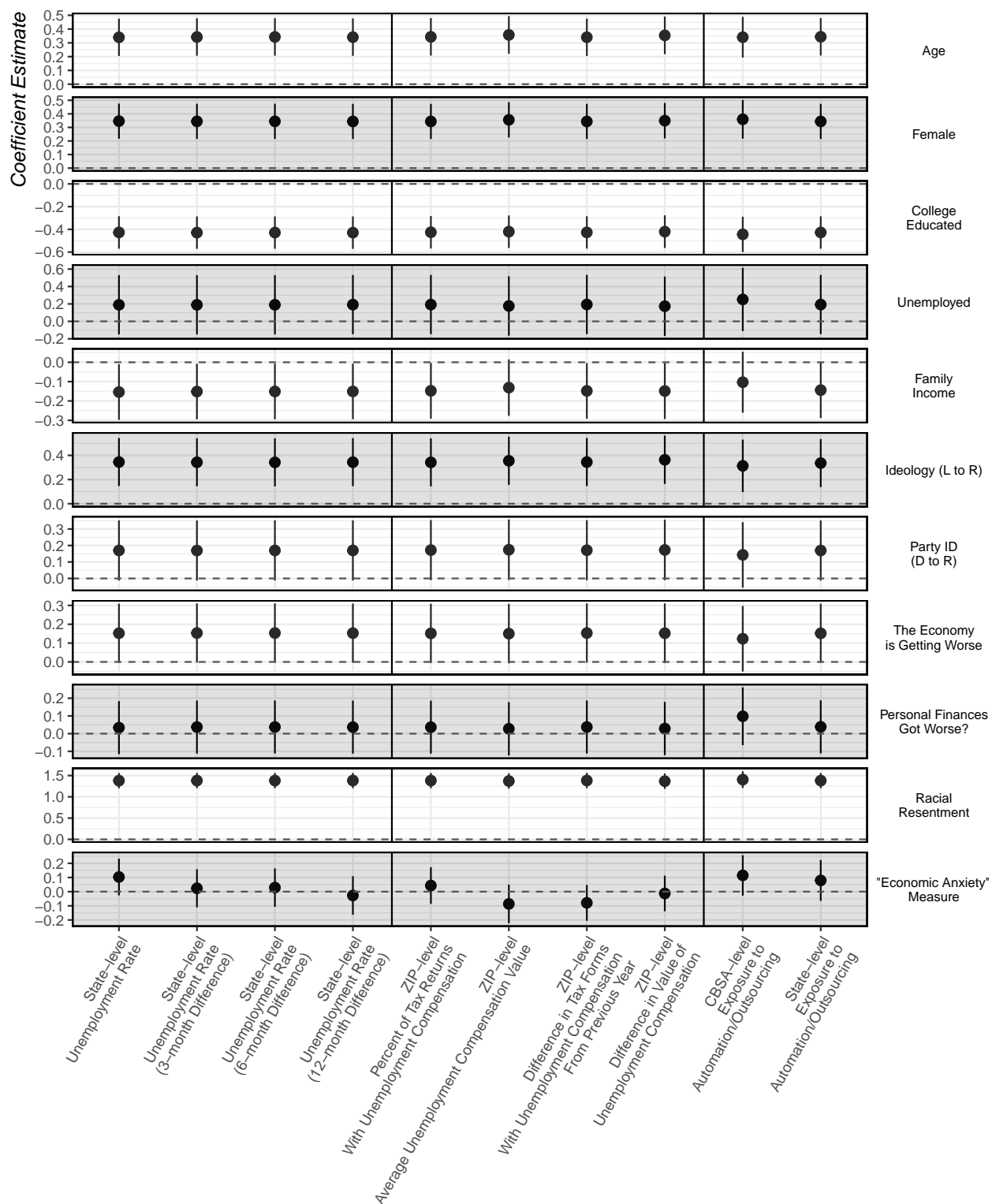
Figure 3 is another “small multiple” plot that analyzes white American attitudes in favor of making it harder to legally immigrate to the United States. The responses come from the Dec. 2016 wave of the VSG data and uses contextual “economic anxiety” proxies that leverage state unemployment rate data, ZIP-level IRS tax return data, and CBSA and state-level exposure to automation/outsourcing. The results tell a similar story. Racial resentment again overpowers every other predictor in the model in magnitude and precision and, in Figure 3, none of the “economic anxiety” proxies are significant at the .05 level. The effect of a negative prospective assessment of the economy has a positive effect and a z -statistic of about 1.9, which coincides with a p -value of 0.057. Indeed, attitudes toward making legal immigration into the United States harder is more a function of political values than of economic indicators or economic assessments. Increasing family income has a negative and significant effect, as does college education, but values of racial resentment and increasing conservative ideology stand out in the results I report in Figure 3.

Figure 4, which explores what coincides with white Americans thinking that immigrants are mostly a “drain” on American society, provides results more sympathetic to the “economic anxiety” argument. This “small multiple” plot is unique because the effects of negative prospective and retrospective economic assessments are both statistically significant across all models. White Americans who think their personal finances got worse over the past 12 months and white Americans who think the economy is getting worse are more likely to think immigrants are a “drain” on American society compared to white Americans who do not hold these negative assessments of past and future economic performance. Further, the first model in Figure 4 also yields the only significant effect of any “economic anxiety” measure. Increasing state-level unemployment coincides with a greater likelihood of a white American thinking immigrants are mostly a “drain”



Data: White Americans, ANES. Models subsetting to survey year include state random effects.

Figure 2: A 'Secret Weapon' Plot of Attitudes Toward Decreasing Immigration Levels (ANES, 1992-2016)



Data: White Americans, Voter Study Group (Dec. 2016)

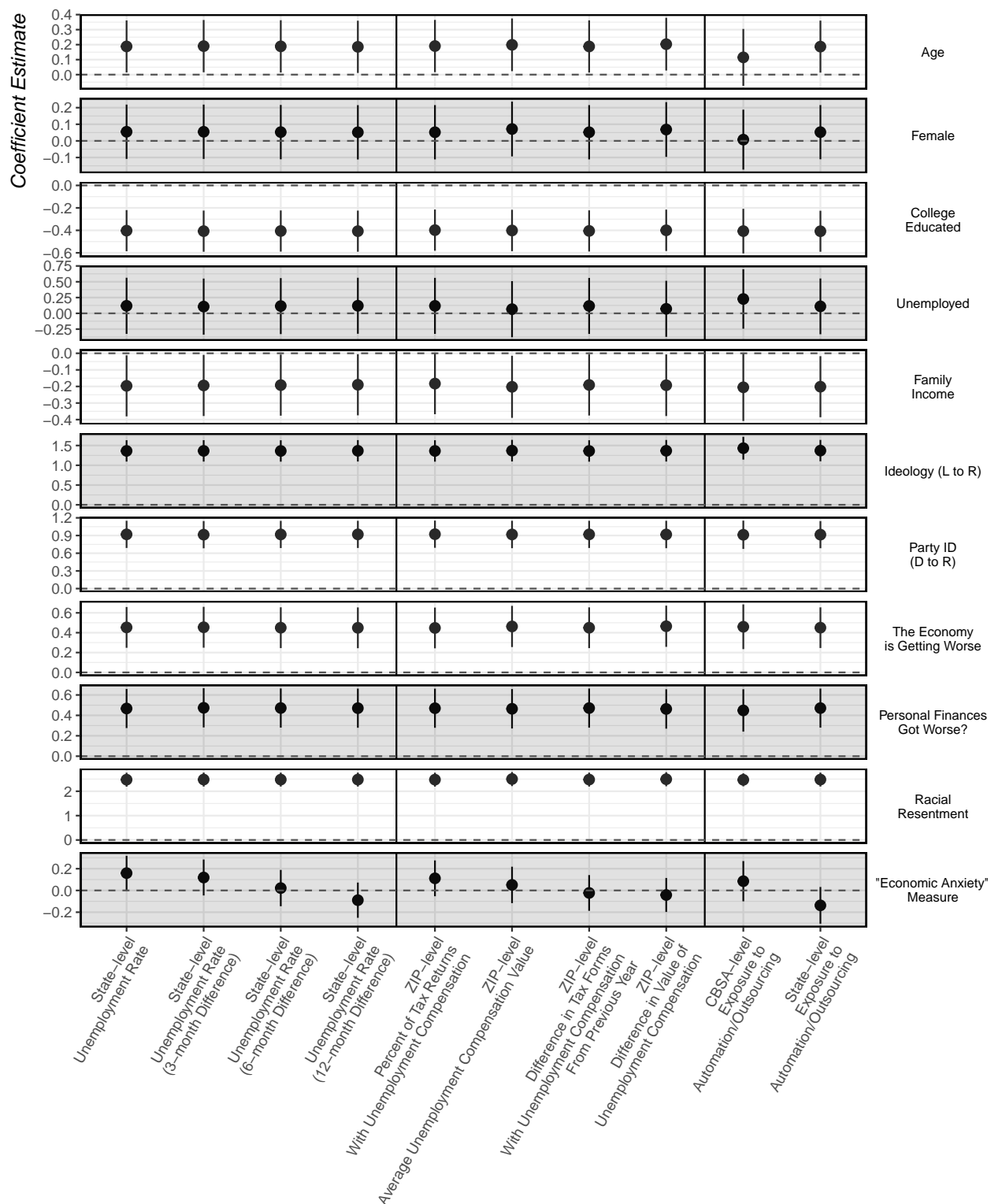
Figure 3: The Covariates of White American Attitudes Toward Making it Harder to Immigrate to the U.S. (VSG, Dec. 2016)

on society. Whereas the data are cross-sectional and limited to the Dec. 2016 wave of the VSG data, this measure becomes a comparison of attitudes toward immigration for white Americans in states with higher unemployment rates versus white Americans in states with lower unemployment rates.

Figure 4 continues a theme from Figure 3, in which attitudes toward immigration are more a function of political and social values rather than economic indicators or assessments of the economy. Racial resentment again has the strongest magnitude effect across all models and its coefficient estimate is also the most precise. The next two coefficients largest in magnitude and precision are increasing GOP partisanship and increasing self-identification as an ideological conservative. This does not discount that negative retrospective and prospective economic assessments have significant effects, and that there are discernible differences in attitudes toward immigrants as a “drain” for white Americans in higher unemployment states versus white Americans in lower unemployment states. However, the magnitude of these effects, and the precision of the estimates we derive from them, pale in comparison to social and political values, especially racial resentment.

I communicate what this means with post-estimation simulations. I use the first model from Figure 4 as the base model here to evaluate the effect of multiple economic anxiety indicators on white Americans thinking that immigration is a drain on American society. I do this because it is the one model of the 41 total regressions summarized in this manuscript that has the results most sympathetic to the “economic anxiety” argument. I create a row for the white male of average age, income, education, economic indicators, and all social and political values from the model. Thereafter, I alter some of the covariates. I call this respondent the “typical white male” for shorthand. I create a row for the typical white male with a standard deviation increase in racial resentment and another row for a two standard deviation increase in racial resentment. I next create a row for the typical white male in the most conceivable situation of “economic anxiety.” This hypothetical male has the average demographics and social and political values but is unemployed, thinks the economy is getting worse, thinks his personal finances got worse over the past year, and is living in a state with an unemployment rate two standard deviations above the mean. I next create two rows for the typical white male who also self-identifies as a strong Republican and the typical white male who self-identifies as very conservative to create additional comparison rows.

Figure 5 reports the results of these simulations. The white male of average demographics, economic conditions, and social and political values has a simulated probability of .405 of thinking that immigrants are mostly a drain on American society. Increasing the racial resentment score by a standard deviation while holding everything else constant results in a simulated probability of .701 of thinking that immigrants are mostly a drain on American society. That percentage change in the simulated probability is 72.86% for a standard deviation increase in racial resentment. A two-standard-deviation increase in racial resentment from the mean results in a simulated probability of .889 in thinking that immigrants are a drain on American society, a percentage change of almost 120% from the mean. Compare, though, the effect of a standard deviation increase in the mean of the racial resentment score to the effect of increasing *all* economic anxiety indicators to their conceivable max. Increasing every economic anxiety indicator to the conceivable max results in simulated probability of .684 for a typical white male thinking that immigrants are mostly a drain on American society. That is roughly a 68% increase from the simulated probability for the typical white male. However, the simulated probability is below



Data: White Americans, Voter Study Group (Dec. 2016)

Figure 4: The Covariates of White American Attitudes Toward Thinking of Immigrants as a Drain on American Society (VSG, Dec. 2016)

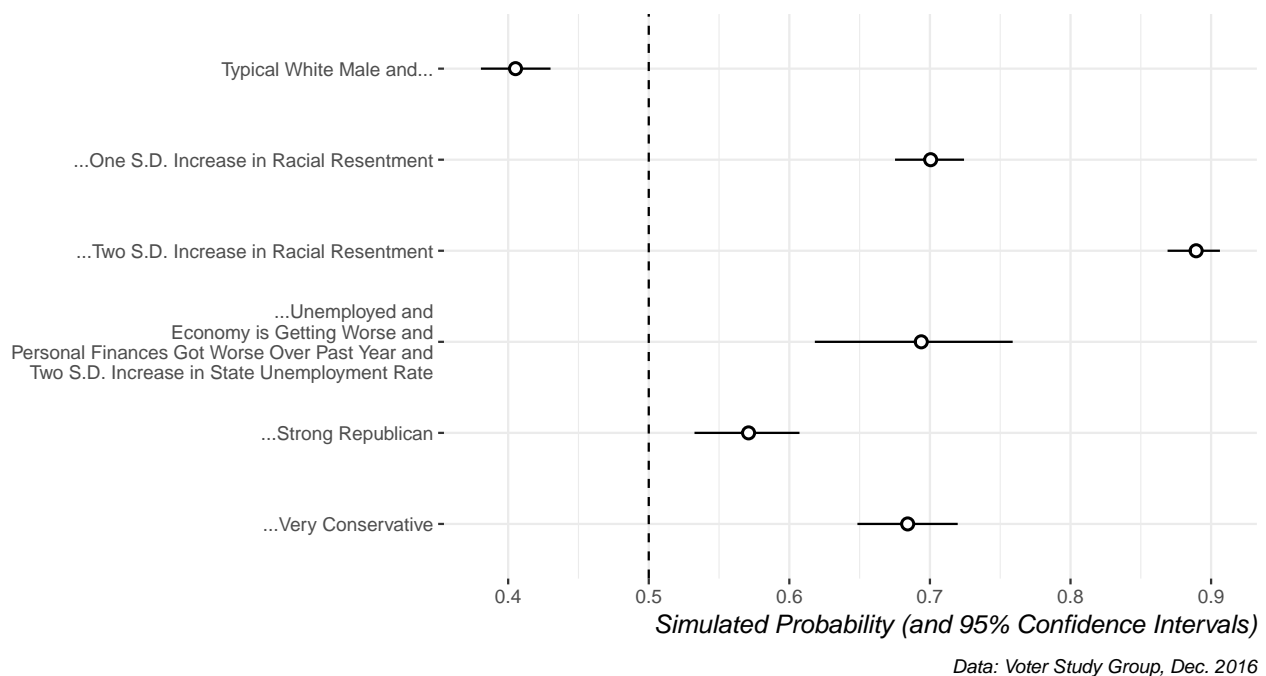


Figure 5: Simulated Probabilities of Thinking Immigrants are a Drain on American Society

the simulated probability for just a standard deviation increase in racial resentment.

The simulations in Figure 5 highlight a fundamental takeaway from the few dozen analyses I conduct and report here. Racial resentment reliably has the largest magnitude effect in any statistical model. Its effect is also the most precise, with z -statistics as high as 12 and 13 (i.e. more than six times the conventional cutoff [$z = 1.96$] for statistical significance). Its effect will dwarf most other reported effects in any statistical model on attitudes toward immigration. There are some results that are also consistent with the “economic anxiety” argument. Negative retrospective assessments of the economy reliably decreases sympathetic attitudes toward immigration. Someone can also cherry-pick models that show more evidence of how “economic anxiety”, broadly defined at the macro-level, influences attitudes toward immigration like I do for the simulations in Figure 5. However, the statistical model most sympathetic to the “economic anxiety” argument will still yield results in which the combined effects of these economic indicators pale in comparison to the effect of racial resentment. Indeed, the effect of a standard deviation increase in racial resentment is greater than the combined effect of every “economic anxiety” measure set at their conceivable maxes. This is important for pundits and scholars who want to distinguish these competing arguments. Racial resentment is reliably the largest and most precise predictor of attitudes toward immigration. There is some evidence consistent with the “economic anxiety” argument as well, as online outlets like *FiveThirtyEight* and *Vox* have noted. However, pundits and scholars interested in magnitude effects should prioritize the role of racial resentment in explaining attitudes toward immigration. Informally, the analyses here suggest an ounce of racial resentment is worth a pound of “economic anxiety” and efforts to place economic anxiety on equal footing with racial resentment belie their respective effects on the attitudes of white Americans toward immigration.

Conclusion

Are attitudes toward immigration—and, by extension, vote for candidates who fan anti-immigration hysteria—functions of racial resentment toward ethnic/racial outgroups? Or can we better understand anti-immigration attitudes from a political economy of immigration opinions framework in which attitudes toward immigrants and immigration are functions of material self-interest and concerns about the economy in a globalized era? This was already a lively empirical debate in academia, but its salience increased after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. It spawned numerous columns in which journalists and other public intellectuals debated relative effects of “economic anxiety” and racial resentment in the wake of the 2016 general election. However, a focus on 2016 will obscure potential spillover of racial resentment into “economic anxiety” (Tesler, 2016), resulting in analyses of opinions that are consistent with both interpretations. Further emphases on isolating “significant” effects take us no closer to comparing relative effect sizes as well.

I offer a comprehensive battery of analyses that explore anti-immigration opinions from 1992 to 2016 in the ANES and VSG data. I take advantage of the racial resentment questions that appear in these data along with the metadata that the survey provides. This creates “economic anxiety” proxies of not just unemployment status and retrospective/prospective assessments about the economy, but macro-level contextual influences such as the unemployment rate and exposure to automation/outsourcing at levels as granular as the state, the county, the core-based statistical area, and the ZIP code. My findings are unequivocal. Racial resentment has the largest and most precise effect on anti-immigration attitudes of any predictor in the model. “Economic anxiety” indicators are not as robust by comparison. Further, those “economic anxiety” proxies that do have a discernible effect on immigration opinions belie that the effect size pales in comparison to the effect of racial resentment. In simulations of a model deliberately cherry-picked because it gave the most evidence in support of the “economic anxiety” hypothesis, racial resentment had a greater effect on thinking immigrants were “mostly a drain” on American society than every “economic anxiety” indicator combined and set at their max. Informally, an ounce of racial resentment is worth a pound of “economic anxiety.”

My analyses try to offer a resolution to arguments about the role of “economic anxiety” and racial resentment in understanding negative attitudes towards immigration and immigrants among white Americans. Again, racial resentment has a much larger and more precise effect on these opinions and “economic anxiety”, certainly the contextual indicators of “economic anxiety”, do not have the same effects. Thus, what I propose here is consistent with how Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) likened the political economy of immigration opinions to a “zombie theory.” Evidence in favor of this perspective is typically weak, inconsistent across space and time, and routinely contradictory within itself. Arguments that rest on an economic intuition of an increased labor market size’s negative effect on real wages has not been vindicated in many analyses (De Silva et al., 2010; Clemens, Lewis and Postel, 2017) and results that do purport strong empirical relationships (e.g. Borjas, 2017) are sensitive to spurious correlations and omitted variable bias (e.g. Clemens and Hunt, 2017). Further, there is no robust relationship between unemployment rates and the success of right-wing anti-immigrant parties; higher unemployment rates may actually decrease votes for these parties (Lubbers, Gijsberts and Scheepers, 2002; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006). The inability of my analyses to produce results at the macro-level consistent the “economic anxiety” argument (i.e. using county/state unemployment rates and exposure to automation/outsourcing) suggest that arguments that try to talk up the role of the

economy in explaining support for Trump—prominently [Kolko \(2016\)](#) and [Casselman \(2017\)](#) at *FiveThirtyEight*—read too much into how some economic indicators manifest in anti-immigration opinions or votes for anti-immigrant politicians. We know correlation does not reflect causation, but correlation may not communicate meaningful or substantive effects either.

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