Does Racial Context Matter?

A study of attitudes on immigration across California counties

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the research on racial context at the county level and its association with attitudes toward immigration and immigrants. Using data from the PPIC California-wide survey to measure attitudes, combined with demographic data from the Census Bureau to define county racial composition, I will test the hypothesis of "white threat". According to this theory there is a correlation between increased levels of non-whites in a given geographical area and negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. The theory has been tested at the national level with equivocal results. This is the first study to focus on California counties alone. The findings here are that racial composition (measured as either percent hispanic or percent foreign born) within counties has no significant effect on attitudes; however the proportion of Republican voters in a county is found to be a better indicator. This suggests that, at least in California, political division between Democrats and Republicans on immigration policy may be a better predictor of attitudes than county racial context.

Introduction

There is a paradox of diversity in America at this time. Even as California becomes the largest majority-minority state[1] and passes a slew of liberal immigration policies,[2] the newly elected President (Trump) rides to victory on a campaign animated by anti-immigrant rhetoric.[3] Many previous studies have sought to explain anti-immigrant attitudes in terms of local contextual factors at the county level across the nation. A few of those studies suggest the racial context plays a significant role. However, it is worth

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[1] See *Los Angeles Times* article (July 8, 2015) citing Census Bureau data: "It's official: Latinos now outnumber whites in California." A graph shows this is the result of differential population growth rates. Since 1990 the Latino population doubled and whereas the white population decreased.

[2] Most recently AB-60, implemented January 2015 making non-citizens eligible for driver license, and Proposition 58, weakening the English-only law in public schools, voted on November, 2016.

[3] For instance, one of his most popular campaign promises has been to build a 40 foot wall on the Mexican border. "Build the wall" is effusively chanted by participants of campaign rallies. Even though polls show public opinion is consistently in favor of restricting further influx of illegal immigrants, the previous characterization of Mexicans by Trump as criminals makes the policy proposal of a wall racially charged, deeply affecting how it has been received.

asking if that theory holds up in California. Are the forces that shape opinion nationwide valid in California?

One of the important findings of this study is that California is not a monolith of pro-immigrant attitudes. There are significant differences across counties: some counties have a mean attitude score which indicates at least half the respondents think immigrants are a burden and support restrictive immigration policy, whereas other counties are nearly unanimous in their favorable opinion about immigrants and immigration. This diversity allows me to test whether the theory of racial context holds up as an explanation. Even though I am unable to find evidence to support the theory of "white threat," I do find that partisan county composition is a much better predictor of attitudes than racial context. This finding suggests that there may be significant differences in the political climate across states which are more important than racial context at the county level in predicting attitudes of whites toward immigrants and immigration policy.

Reviewing the Literature

In *White Backlash*, Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal (2015) provide a useful conceptual approach which identifies geographic proximity and media communication as two primary factors determining how individuals experience the effects of immigration. The theory of racial threat they advance is that whites, "living in areas where immigration is more pronounced and the visible effects of immigration are more widespread should have stronger reactions than those residing in areas with little to no immigration" (46). Abrajano and Hajnal point out that previous studies on this topic have been inconclusive in their findings.

Citrin et al (1997) find no statistically significant correlation between the racial diversity of a person's state and their attitudes on restrictionist immigration policy. However, their level of analysis, the state, may not register effects since individuals in a large geographic area can live isolated from contact with immigrant populations, whereas, at lower levels of analysis, the visibility and effects of racial

diversity become far more pronounced (Ha 2010). In *Partners or Rivals?*, Betina Cutaia Wilkinson (2015) corroborates Citrin et al's findings using a nationwide, county-level analysis; discovering that although objective county racial composition has no significant effect on whites' attitudes, subjective perceptions of racial composition do matter (160).

In the other camp are those who do find evidence suggesting that racial and ethnic context is an important determinant of attitudes regarding immigration policy and immigrant groups (Ha 2010; Berg 2009; Newman 2013). Each of these contributions contains interesting variations. Ha (2010) concludes that although the racial composition has an effect, it is mediated by the level of direct contact with those in other racial groups. Berg (2009) utilizes a network perspective, finding that attitudes about immigration policy are heavily influenced by characteristics of individual's personal contacts and the broader social environment. In a time series analysis of census data, Newman (2013) finds there are significant differences between areas with previously large immigrant groups and those which experience a sudden influx after initially having low racial diversity. [4]

Theory

The foregoing survey of literature on the relationship between racial context and proximity on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy is by no means exhaustive. My goal has been to represent a diversity of perspectives. This paper will not attempt to overturn or contradict any of these findings. What is novel about the approach taken here is that the level of analysis will be restricted to California, in contrast to the national scope of previous studies. The benefit to be gained from limiting the analysis in this way is that it permits me to observe the effects of racial composition in the context of a single state with a definable political culture and history on immigration policy. The issue with

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[4] Newman's conclusion deserves further elaboration: " This demonstrates that over-time growth in local Hispanic populations triggers threat and opposition to immigration among whites residing in contexts with few initial Hispanics but reduces threat and opposition to immigration among whites residing in contexts with large preexisting Hispanic populations".

nation-level studies is that they have no way of accounting for the significant differences there are between states which can strongly condition people's' attitudes. For instance, California's experience with Proposition 187 in 1994 had consequences that still resonate today,[5] making it a unique political environment, the effects of which can only be captured by analyzing it *ceteris paribus*.[6]

I will be testing the theory of "white threat" in this paper. As articulated by Abrajano and Hajnal (2015, 46), this theory assumes that whites living in areas highly affected by immigration, where there is a highly visible and pronounced immigrant population, will have negative attitudes toward immigrants and favor restrictive policies. Conversely, whites living in areas where immigration has had little visible effect are expected to have reduced anxiety and less negative attitudes with regard to immigrants. From this theoretical framework follows a null and alternative hypothesis:

Ho: percent hispanic in county will not be associated with white people's' attitudes.

Ha: increases in percent hispanic population will be associated with increases in white people's' attitudes.

Variables

The independent variable[7] in this study is the proportion of hispanic population in a given California county. To test the theory of "white threat," I need a way to measure the level of effect of immigration at the county level. Even though percent hispanic population is not a direct, objective measure of this, I believe it is a good proxy, and a valid operationalization of a concept important to this

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[5] For instance, a *Los Angeles Times* article in April 2002 notes that "Before 1994, Republicans did relatively well among Latino voters, who tended to be entrepreneurial, middle class and conservative and who consistently gave statewide Republican candidates more than one-third of their votes. Since then, Republicans have been lucky to attract a quarter of that vote, in part because a chunk of their previous Latino support abandoned them in the wake of Proposition 187 and partly because of changes in the character of the Latino electorate."

[6] Further research should focus on close comparative analysis of states to test possible effects of political culture, institutions, and shared history on public attitudes. To my knowledge there hasn't been much work done here.

[7] See Appendix C for descriptive statistics, and Appendix B for breakdown of survey responses by county.

study.[8] The data was obtained for 20 out of 58 counties for the 2013 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.[9] Data from the remaining counties is not included because there were not sufficient observations in the survey data on the dependent variable (opinions on immigrants and immigration policy) to aggregate for a statistically significant measurement of the mean.[10]

Even though I have chosen percent hispanic as the best operationalization of racial context, it could be argued that percent foreign born may be more predictive of attitudes. For that reason I have included it in this study as a possible explanatory variable. Data was also obtained from the Census Bureau. Shasta County has the lowest foreign born at 5.1% and Santa Clara has the highest, 37.1%. The foreign born percentage for California as a whole is 27%, compared to the average for all 20 counties included in this study which is 23%, indicating that the sample of counties is fairly representative.

California counties also vary significantly in their demographic proportions. My sample of 20 counties includes a low proportion of 9% hispanic in Shasta to a high proportion of 51% hispanic in San Bernardino. The mean of 30% shows the sample of counties is fairly representative of the state as a whole, being within one standard deviation of the state-wide hispanic population proportion of 38%.

The dependent variable is an index of responses by whites on two survey questions[11] in the 2013 PPIC Statewide Survey.[12] The responses were coded 1 for the less restrictive and more positive attitude toward immigrants and 2 for restrictive policy preference and negative attitude. The higher the index of the combined responses, the stronger the respondent's negative attitude. Combining the responses in a single index variable allows for measurement of individual attitudes across two dimensions being probed

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[8] Even though the proportion of hispanic population is not an objective measure of immigrant population, when trying to determine perceptions of "threat" posed from immigration to whites, objective measures will be less helpful. What is more important is the subjective perception of threat, and what is perceived is the level of hispanic population, not the objective level of immigrant population.

[9] See appendix for more details on source.

[10] All counties with less than 10 observations on the dependent variable were eliminated. Since the average hispanic percentage from my sample of counties (30%) is fairly close to the state proportion (38.4%), I can be fairly confident the counties eliminated have not significantly distorted the representativeness of the sample.

[11] See appendix for full question verbiage.

[12] See appendix for link to data and survey methodology.

by the survey questions: the respondent's attitude toward immigrants (are they a burden or a benefit?) and the respondent's attitude about policies affecting undocumented immigrants (should they be allowed to stay?).

Since the hypothesis bases predictions on the effect across individuals in the county, I have created a mean attitude score for each county based on survey responses using the following formula:

Attitude by county $= \sum(q1 + q2) \div n$

Where q1 and q2 are the responses to survey questions included in the index and n = total observations in the county. In total, there were 998 surveys included in the sample; responses were aggregated on the county level and a mean was calculated to be used in the final analysis.

The variation in attitude scores across California counties is a significant finding of this study.[13] The range in mean scores is from a low of 2.4 in Marin County to a high of 3.1 in Butte County. A two tailed test for the difference in means of Butte and Marin counties is a 95% CI (.16, 1.24) at P < .05. With a standard deviation of .21, the lower quartile (2.5) is separated from mean of the upper quartile (3.0) by two standard deviations, providing statistically significant differences among the observations on the dependent variable at the aggregated county level.

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[13] See Appendix B for table of descriptives for survey responses by county.

Analysis

The hypothesis being tested here is that increases in proportion of hispanic population in a given county will be positively correlated with an increase in the mean attitude scores for each county. Figure A.1 was created with percentage of hispanic by county (independent variable) on the x-axis and the aggregated attitudes of whites on immigrants and immigration policy (dependent variable) on the y-axis. Initial observation of the scatterplot would indicates little to no effect. There are five counties with a mean attitude at or below two on the lower end of hispanic proportion; but over the 40% hispanic proportion mark, all counties have a perceived threat score of higher than two.
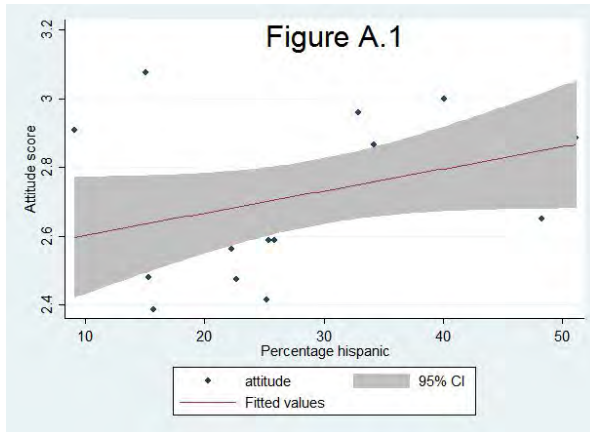
Figure A.1

To test whether there is a statistically significant relationship between increases in the independent variable and increases in the dependent variable, I run a bivariate regression model,[14] resulting in an r-square of only .16 and an extremely low coefficient of .006 with a 95% confidence interval containing 0. The low r-square indicates the regression line does not perform much better than a line assuming Ho is true (no effect), and the test statistic of 1.85 at $P < .08$ confirms that I cannot reject the Ho based on this data.

The test for association between percent foreign born as a possible alternative explanation obtains similar results as percent hispanic. The r-square for this model[15] is .03 and the low test statistic of 1.22 is only significant at $P < .24$. Replacing percent hispanic with percent foreign born only reduces the performance of the model.

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[14] See Appendix D for STATA output of regression model.
[15] See Appendix D for STATA output of regression model

This evidence suggests the theory of "white threat" based on county-level racial context does not hold up to empirical testing in California counties. However, testing an alternative explanation, I do find that a far better predictor of differences in attitude scores is the political composition of the county. This result was found by regressing the mean attitude score for each county on the percentage of voters in the county who voted for the Republican candidate (Mitt Romney) in the 2012 national election[16] (see scatterplot below).
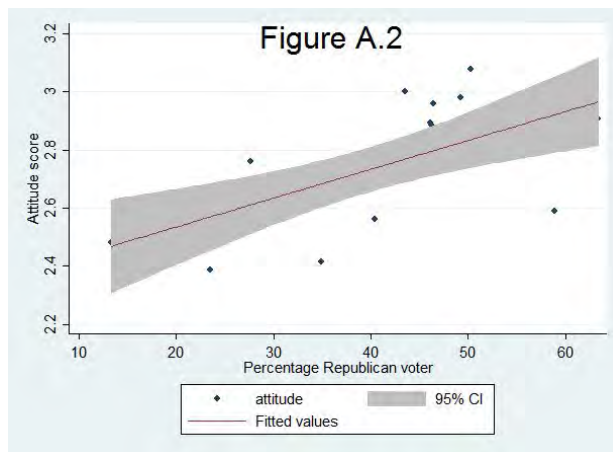
Figure A.2

The model[17] (see figure A.2) performs much better than the previous ones using either percent hispanic or percent foreign born. The r-square of .46 indicates a moderate level of association. The resulting test statistic of 3.85 is significant at the level of P<.001, assuming the Ho of no association. The scatterplot to the left shows there is a consistent upward movement of mean attitude scores as the proportion who voted Republican in the county gets higher, indicating the more Republican voters in a county, the more negative the aggregated attitude toward immigrants and immigration. Interpreting the coefficient of 0.01, for every one percent increase in the percentage Republican voter in a county, the mean attitude score is raised by 0.01 of a point. This is difficult to conceptualize since the dependent variable is not quantitative, but roughly, average negative attitudes can be raised by half a point on the scale of 2 to 4 with a 50% increase in Republican voters within a county.

Conclusion

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[16] Percentages were taken from Politico election results by county in California. See appendix for link to report.
[17] See Appendix D for STATA output of regression model.

These findings are a bit surprising. Along with similar studies at the national level, I have found there is no obvious link between the racial composition at the county level and whites' attitudes toward immigrants. However, I have shown that counties with higher levels of Republican voters do score higher, on the average, for negative attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but at least in California, partisanship matters more than county racial context. It is important to note, however, that the percent of voters for the Republican presidential candidate is not necessarily a county-level effect. This could be an individual-level effect, and future research should be done to determine whether partisanship is a better predictor on the individual level than county partisan composition.

One insight to be drawn is that it should not be assumed that as demographic trends advance, and county hispanic population increases, whites will develop negative attitudes toward immigrants. The finding here indicates that the racial context has no discernible association with whites' attitudes at the county level, and that partisan composition *may* be the best predictor of whether and how attitudes shift. This finding may explain why, as the California state legislature becomes increasingly Democratic, we see a higher levels of pro-immigrant legislation. It has often been remarked that the Republican Party in California never recovered from supporting Proposition 187 in 1994,[18] being labeled thereafter as the party that tried to pass anti-immigrant legislation. These findings support the hypothesis that immigration in California has become an issue on which Republicans and Democrats have clearly opposing positions.

Further research should be done to explain why some counties have high levels of negative attitudes among whites, while others do not. I suspect that a more powerful explanation can be found by using percentage rural population as the independent variable, as opposed to the approach taken in this study. Another beneficial avenue of research is to test the "white threat" hypothesis across multiple states with varying political environments, comparing differences in the effect of racial context at the county

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[18] This proposition was heavily promoted by leaders of the Republican Party. It included provisions to make all non-citizens ineligible for government services like K-12 education and non-emergency health care.

level. For instance, racial context may have more effect in a state without an established political history of confronting immigration issues, as California clearly has.

Conclusions from this study are limited methodologically by the low number of observations available for comparison. Future work could be done to improve on this by compiling data from a succession of years, thereby expanding the survey responses enough to include measurements from all 58 counties. Another limitation is that there has been no attempt here to identify mechanisms of causation. The purpose here has been to explore possible connections and patterns in hopes of opening up avenues for further inquiry.

It is encouraging that negative attitudes toward immigrants are not correlated with increases in hispanic or foreign born population at the county level. However, an important finding here is that there *is* great diversity among counties in California. Some evince high levels of antipathy toward immigrants and some do not. Continued work should be done to understand why this is.

References

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Appendix A

Data Sources, methodology, and Survey Questions

Percentage hispanic, foreign born, and Republican vote share by county

- U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program (PEP). Updated annually. http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.html.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program (PEP). Updated annually. http://factfinder2.census.gov/
- 2012 California Presidential Results (Data provided by Associated Press) http://www.politico.com/2012-election/results/president/california/

Attitudes toward immigrants in California and PPIC survey methodology

- PPIC Statewide Survey Jan 2013 http://www.ppic.org/main/dataSet.asp?i=1405
- PPIC survey methodology http://www.ppic.org/content/other/SurveyMethodology.pdf

Survey Question wording - PPIC Statewide Survey Jan 2013

Q34. On another topic, please indicate which statement comes closest to your own view—even if neither is exactly right. [ROTATE] [1] Immigrants today are a benefit to California because of their hard work and job skills [OR] [2] Immigrants today are a burden to California because they use public services.

1   immigrants are a benefit to California
2   immigrants are a burden to California
8   [VOL] don't know
9   [VOL] refuse

Q35. Which comes closer to your view about how to handle undocumented immigrants who are living in the U.S.? [ROTATE] There should be a way for them to stay in the country legally, if certain requirements are met [OR] They should not be allowed to stay in this country legally.

1   allowed to stay legally
2   not allowed to stay legally
8   [VOL] don't know

Appendix B

Descriptive statistics for survey responses by county

-> county = Alameda

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min        Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      40     2.475   .7156672      2          4
```

-> county =Butte

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min      Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      13   3.076923   .7595545      2        4
```

-> county = Contra Costa

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min      Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      42   2.690476    .8692047      2        4
```

-> county = Kern

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      15     2.8      1.014185      2      4
```

-> county = Los Angeles

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |     169   2.650888   .8944351      2      4
```

-> county = Marin

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      18   2.388889    .6978023      2      4
```

-> county = Orange

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      82   2.865854    .8994126      2      4
```

-> county = Placer

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      22   2.590909    1.007547      2      4
```

-> county = Riverside

```
        Variable |      Obs     Mean   Std. Dev.    Min    Max
-------------+---------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      50     2.98    .8687312      2      4
```

-> county = Sacramento

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     32    2.5625    .7593503        2       4
```

-> county = San Bernardino

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     44    2.886364   1.061283       2       4
```

-> county = San Diego

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     76    2.960526   .8073131       2       4
```

-> county = San Francisco

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     27    2.481481   .8489981       2       4
```

-> county = San Joaquin

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     14      3       .7844645        2       4
```

-> county = San Mateo

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     17    2.588235   .7122871       2       4
```

-> county = Santa Clara

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     46    2.76087    .9929705       2       4
```

-> county = Shasta

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     11    2.909091   .9438798       2       4
```

-> county = Solano

```
        Variable |     Obs      Mean   Std. Dev.       Min     Max
-------------+-------------------------------------------
        attitude |     12    2.416667   .7929615       2       4
```

-> county = Sonoma

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
attitude	17	2.588235	.7952062	2	4

-> county = Ventura

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
attitude	19	2.894737	.875261	2	4

<u>Appendix C</u>

Descriptive statistics, independent and dependent variables

Mean attitude score (dependent variable)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
attitude	20	2.727945	.2120813	2.388	3.0769

Percentage hispanic (independent variable)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
hispanic	20	29.385	13.21894	9.1	51.1

Percent Republican voters (dependent variable)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
republican	20	39.365	14.33642	13.3	63.3

Percent Foreign born (dependent variable)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
foreign_born	20	22.915	8.995044	5.2	37.1

<u>Appendix D</u>

Regression Models

```
. reg attitude foreign_born

      Source |       SS           df       MS            Number of obs   =        20
-------------+----------------------------------         F(1, 18)        =      1.49
       Model |  .065440292          1  .065440292        Prob > F        =    0.2376
    Residual |  .789150942         18  .043841719        R-squared       =    0.0766
-------------+----------------------------------         Adj R-squared   =    0.0253
       Total |  .854591234         19  .044978486        Root MSE        =   .20938

------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      Coef.   Std. Err.      t    P>|t|     [95% Conf. Interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
foreign_born |  -.0065244   .0053403    -1.22   0.238    -.0177439    .0046951
       _cons |   2.877452   .1310233    21.96   0.000     2.602183    3.152722
------------------------------------------------------------------------------

.
. reg attitude hispanic

      Source |       SS           df       MS            Number of obs   =        20
-------------+----------------------------------         F(1, 18)        =      3.43
       Model |  .136753814          1  .136753814        Prob > F        =    0.0805
    Residual |  .717837419         18  .039879857        R-squared       =    0.1600
-------------+----------------------------------         Adj R-squared   =    0.1134
       Total |  .854591234         19  .044978486        Root MSE        =    .1997

------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      Coef.   Std. Err.      t    P>|t|     [95% Conf. Interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
    hispanic |   .006418    .0034658     1.85   0.081    -.0008634    .0136993
       _cons |  2.539354    .111202     22.84   0.000     2.305727     2.77298
------------------------------------------------------------------------------

.
. reg attitude republican

      Source |       SS           df       MS            Number of obs   =        20
-------------+----------------------------------         F(1, 18)        =     14.85
       Model |  .386349947          1  .386349947        Prob > F        =    0.0012
    Residual |  .468241287         18  .026013405        R-squared       =    0.4521
-------------+----------------------------------         Adj R-squared   =    0.4216
       Total |  .854591234         19  .044978486        Root MSE        =    .16129

------------------------------------------------------------------------------
    attitude |      Coef.   Std. Err.      t    P>|t|     [95% Conf. Interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
  republican |   .0099466    .002581     3.85   0.001     .0045242     .015369
       _cons |   2.336399   .1078106    21.67   0.000     2.109897      2.5629
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```