

Mitchell's Musings 8-24-17: Being Somewhat Right and Mainly Wrong

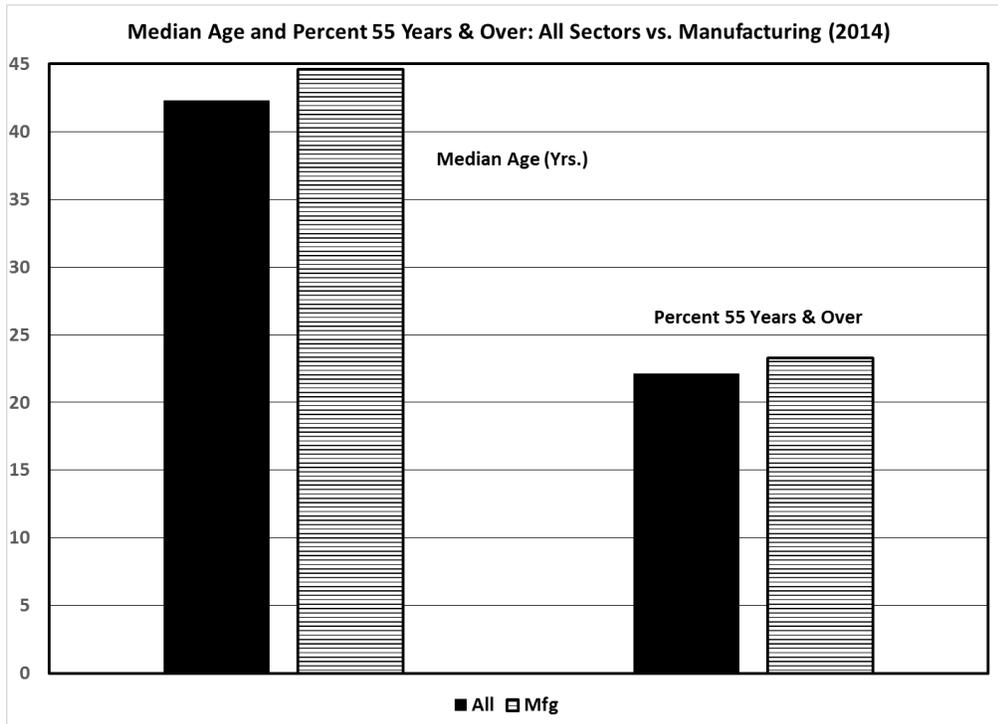
Daniel J.B. Mitchell

Of late, political pundits are trying to understand the appeal of Donald Trump on the Republican side of the presidential race and, to a lesser degree, Bernie Sanders' appeal on the Democratic side. Both are typically viewed as "populists" who have a limited appeal to a base audience in their respective parties. One approach is to depict the two candidates as mirror images, one on the left and the other on the right, who are somehow similar.

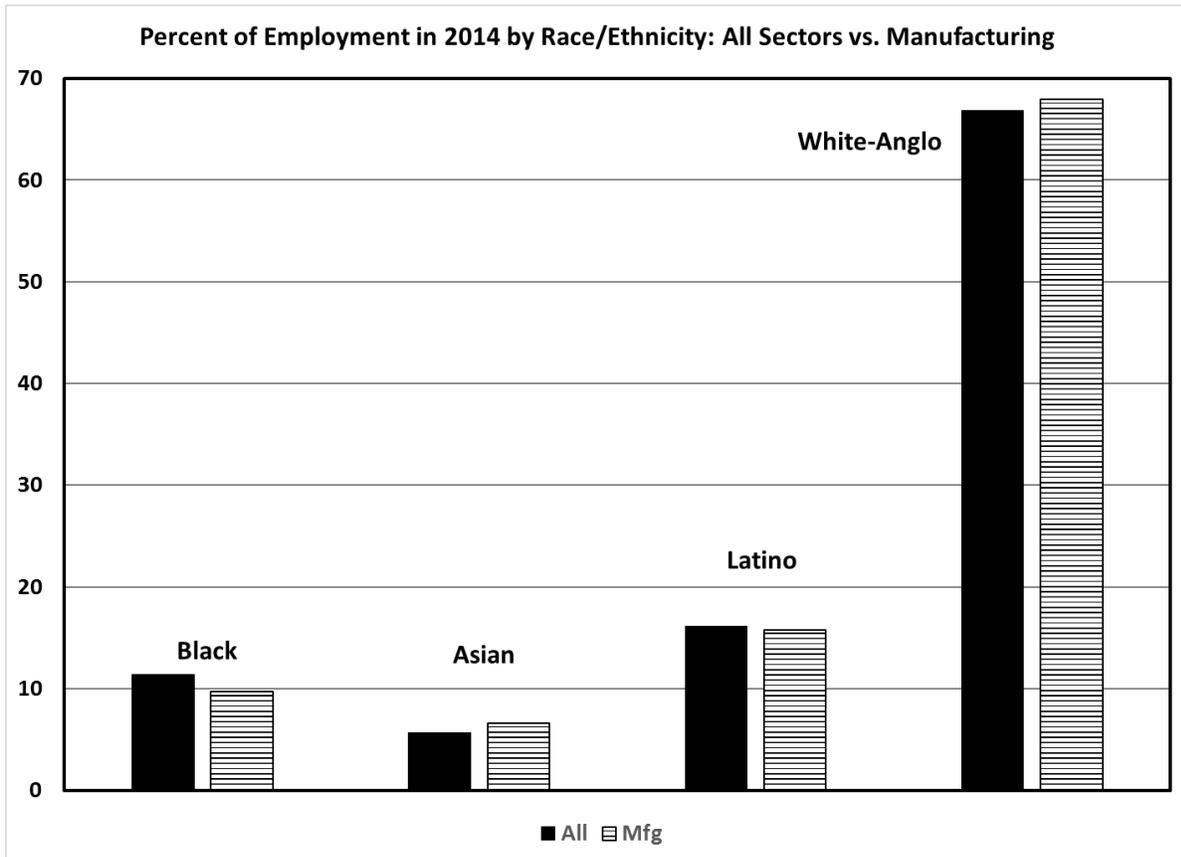
For those pundits who focus on Trump, there is a notion that his appeal is to older white males who became economically outmoded due to some inevitable force – Technology? Inexorable trade competition in a global economy? – and therefore have fading and anachronistic concerns about disappearing jobs. It's harder to put Sanders in that category, however, because he hasn't made anti-immigrant comments whereas Trump has.

I am neither a pollster nor a political scientist so I won't pursue the question of whether the two candidates are appealing to similar groups or not. What I will say is that if your image of a disenchanted voter is an aging white male manufacturing worker, or perhaps a white male displaced from that sector, you might want to take a look at manufacturing demographics.

Let's start with the male/female breakdown. For the entire employed workforce in 2014, almost 47% were women. In the manufacturing sector, a little over 29% were women. So, if you had the impression that there were more men than women in manufacturing relative to the overall workforce, you were correct. But note that almost 3 out of 10 workers in manufacturing were women. Would you really want to take the position that those female workers aren't concerned about their jobs and/or potential displacement from those jobs?



What about age? Again, if your preconception is that a typical manufacturing worker is older than the typical worker in the overall workforce, you are correct. However, as the chart above shows, the difference is not striking. The median age of a worker in manufacturing is a couple of years older than that found in the overall workforce, but the share of older workers in manufacturing really isn't all that different. Presumably, the younger workers in manufacturing care about job loss or the threat therefrom.



As for the race/ethnic cut, yes, there is a slightly lower percentage of blacks and Latinos in manufacturing compared to the overall workforce, but – again – the difference, shown on the chart above, isn't sharp.¹ There are actually somewhat more Asians proportionately in manufacturing than in the workforce as a whole. Of course, manufacturing is a broad term and at a detailed level, the various minority percentages vary. For example, blacks are more heavily represented in motor vehicles and Latinos are more heavily represented in furniture manufacturing, Women form a slim majority of textile and apparel manufacturing workers.

What we can say about manufacturing workers is not that they are totally different in their response to political appeals that connect to their jobs because of their demographics, but rather that they are responsive because neither political party has been sensitive to their plight. Would a young Latina

¹The bars on the chart for white-Anglo workers are estimated as residuals after subtracting blacks, Asians, and Latinos. That approach slightly underestimates the white-Anglo group because a relatively small percentage of Latinos also identify as black. But the chart is reasonably accurate for purposes of this musing. All charts and data are from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

worker in manufacturing not be concerned about possible layoffs or displacement simply because she isn't an older white-Anglo male? As long as there is an impression among the political elite that there is nothing to be done about jobs in manufacturing because blind forces of technology and trade are at work, there will be political space for "populist" appeals to such workers, regardless of age, sex, race, or ethnicity. As long as there is an elite stereotype that manufacturing is composed of just aging white males who are a declining share of the electorate, and that therefore concerns of the workforce in that sector don't matter, there will be such political space. And, no, just telling everyone to go to college, and even offering plans to subsidize going to college, isn't a political solution – or even an economic solution – to the problem.