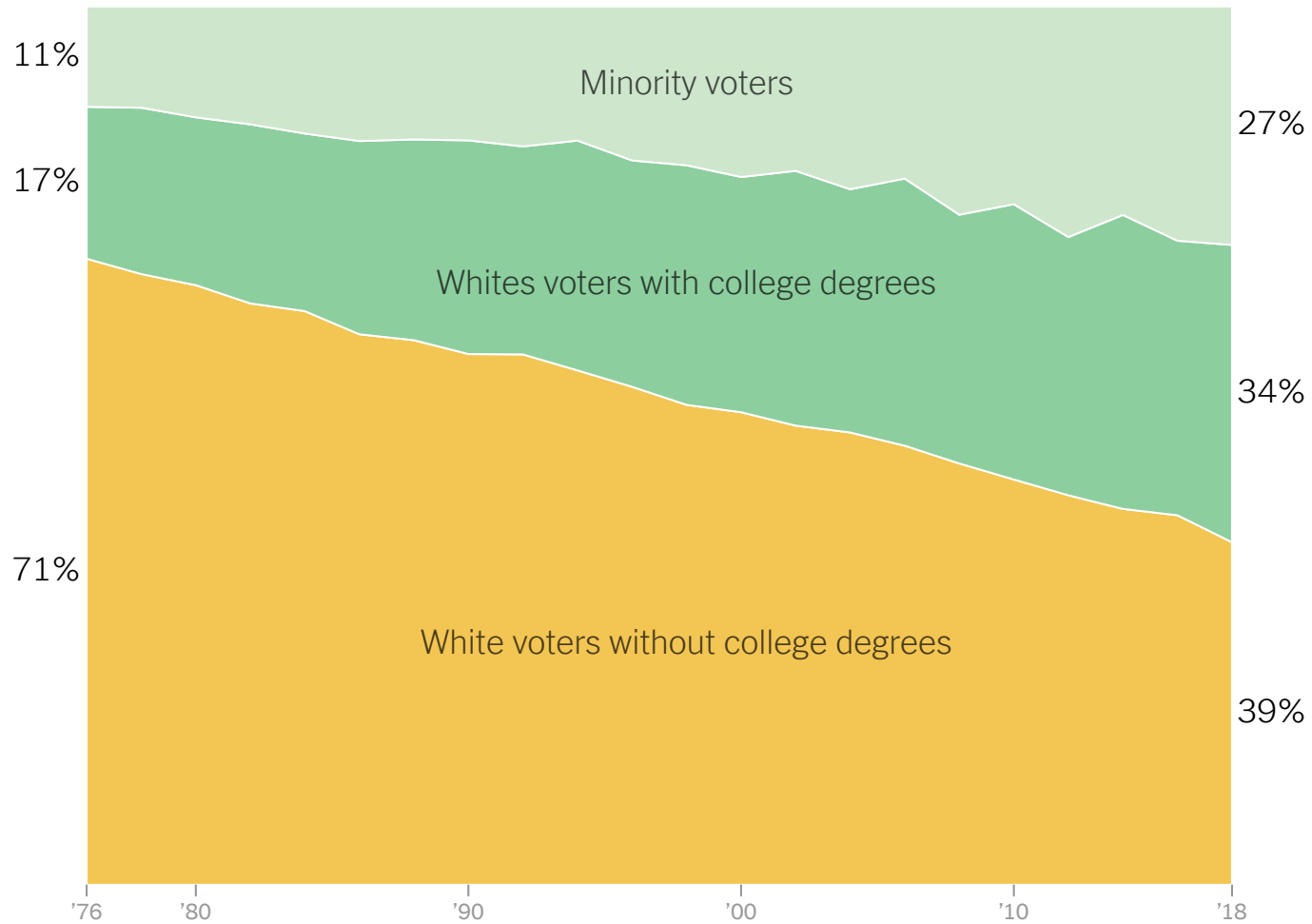


The Relentless Shrinking of Trump's Base

Ford Fessenden and Lazaro Gamio, *The New York Times* Online, October 22, 2020

A steady decline in white voters without college degrees, 1976-2018

A Steady Decline in White Voters Without College Degrees, 1976-2018



Source: Census Current Population Survey, University of Minnesota historic data collection

In 2016, Donald J. Trump confounded the polls in part by generating an unanticipated level of enthusiasm and turnout from a group that had grown increasingly apathetic about elections: white voters without college degrees.

But in 2020, [Mr. Trump](#) and [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) face a drastically changed electorate. The cohort of white working-class voters — who gave Mr. Trump just enough of a margin to [win the election in 2016](#) — has been in a long-term decline, while both minority voters and college-educated voters have steadily increased.

The decline, a demographic glacier driven largely by aging, has continued since 2016. The number of voting-age working-class white Americans has dropped by more than five million in the past four years, while the number of minority voters and college-educated white voters has collectively increased by more than 13 million in the same period. In key swing states, the changes far outstrip Mr. Trump's narrow 2016 margins.

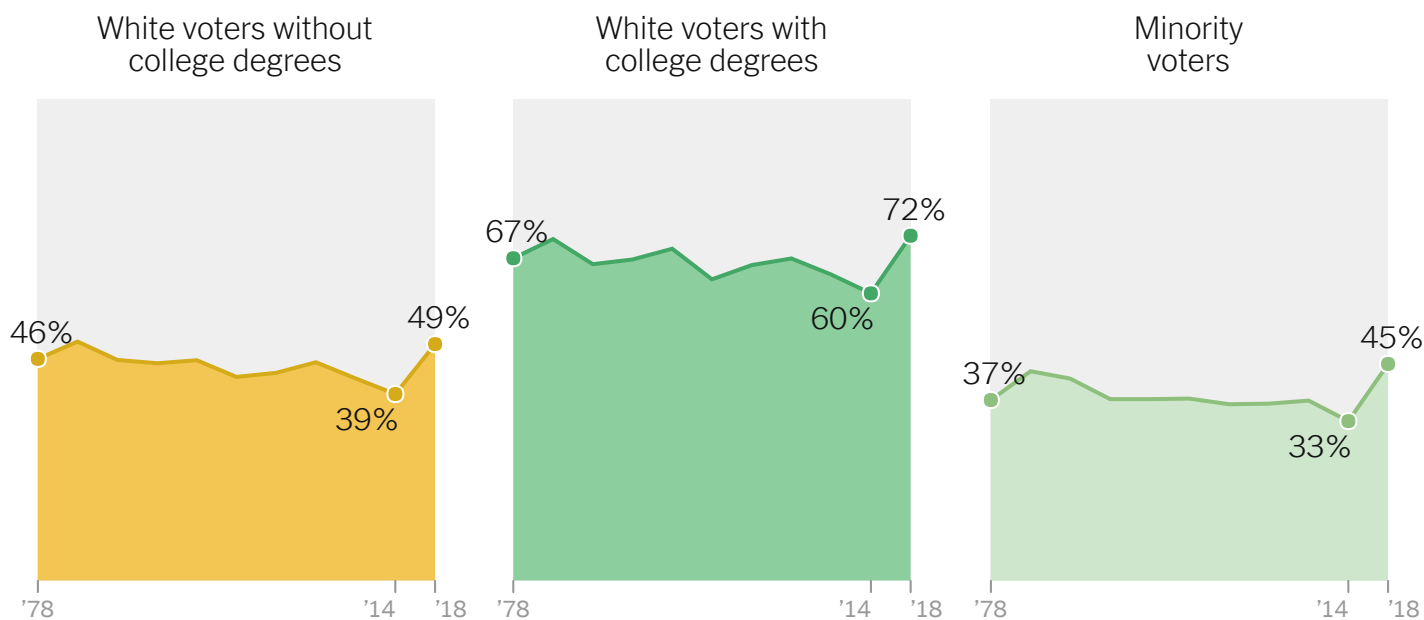
His [campaign leaders are betting](#) that a two-year grass-roots mobilization that has yielded significant voter registration gains will overcome the demographic disadvantage and the polls, again.

“As a clear show of support for the president's policies, Americans are registering as Republican with a Republican president in office,” said Samantha Zager, a spokeswoman for the Trump campaign. “And those significant voter registration gains prove President Trump is expanding his base and will win four more years in the White House as a result.”

Certainly, these white blue-collar voters continue to show enthusiasm for Mr. Trump and Republicans — not just in [approval polls](#) that have been remarkably stable for four years, but also at the ballot box in 2018.

Two years ago, even without the president on the ballot, Mr. Trump's white blue-collar base turned out in numbers not seen in a midterm election in decades.

Share of eligible voters who cast ballots in midterm elections



Source: Census Current Population Survey, University of Minnesota historic data collection

The president has shown little interest in expanding his appeal beyond that base, and his campaign has been working on a strategy of finding more such voters.

“For his entire term, Trump has made very few attempts to reach out and broaden his coalition,” said Larry J. Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. “He has been trying to expand the Trump base that casts ballots, and they could substitute for the diminishing group of blue-collar whites.”

In some key states including Pennsylvania and Florida, new Republican voter registrations have outnumbered new Democratic ones.

“The combination of the president’s personality and style combined with the demographic challenges leaves very little margin for error,” said Ken Spain, a Republican strategist.

“Increasing registration while juicing turnout is his only play at this stage. It would mean defying the polls again.”

But Mr. Trump has appeared to generate a countervailing enthusiasm among both educated white voters and minority voters. The turnout of both groups spiked in 2018 as well.

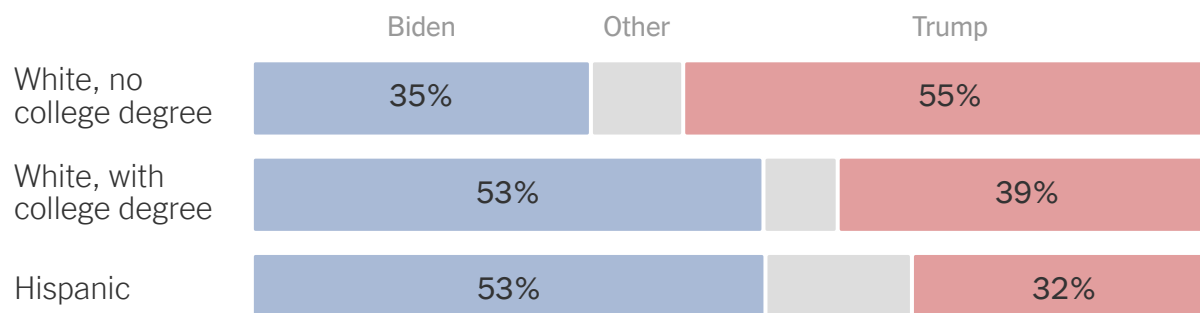
The result was the 2018 blue wave in which the [Democrats took over](#) the House of Representatives.

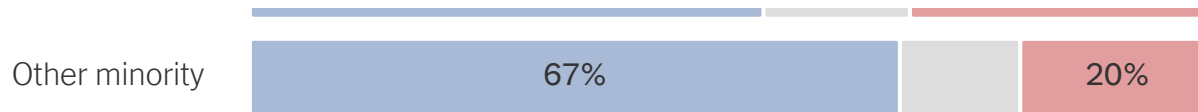
“You had a heroic performance in these declining groups in 2016,” said Ruy Teixeira, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, referring to the Trump base.

In 2018, other groups closed that enthusiasm gap. If that happens again, Mr. Trump’s advantage diminishes. “Without replicating the relative turnout advantage he had in 2016, what has he got?” Mr. Teixeira said. “He has a sinking demographic ship, and he may go down with it.”

This demographic divide has become a bellwether for political preference: A Trump coalition of working-class white voters and a Biden coalition of college-educated white voters — especially women — and minority voters.

Support for Trump and Biden in states with close races





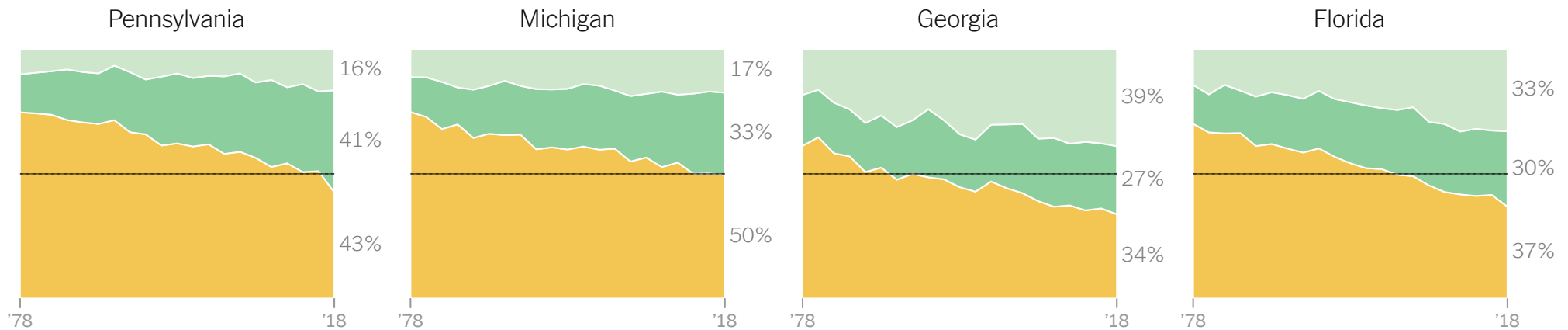
Source: Based on New York Times/Siena College polls of 15,089 voters in 18 states from Sept. 8 to Oct. 19.

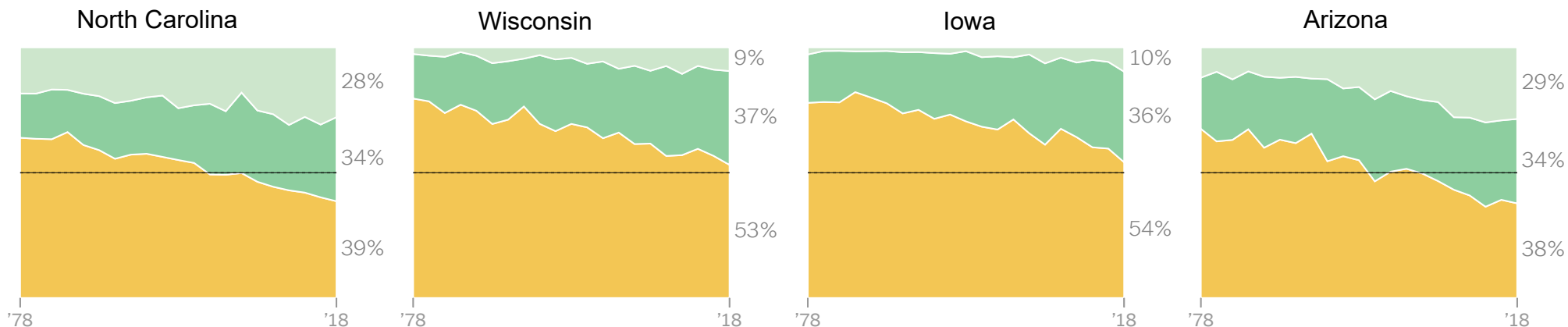
Shifts in swing states

If Mr. Trump is to be successful turning out new voters, there are plenty in swing states, which remain bastions of the white working-class vote. But most of these states have also been undergoing the same changes in the electorate as the country as a whole.

Even in battlegrounds, a decline in white voters without college degrees.

■ Minority voters ■ White voters with college degrees ■ White voters with no college degrees





Source: Census Current Population Survey, University of Minnesota historic data collection

And compared with Mr. Trump’s tiny 2016 margins in some of these states, the demographic changes since then are a tsunami, especially in critical states like Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan.

The table below shows the shifts in the voting-age population of the Trump coalition (white voters with no college degrees) and the Biden coalition (minority voters and white voters with college degrees).

Change in voting-age population, 2016-2020

	Trump '16 margin	Trump coalition	Biden coalition
Pennsylvania	+44,292	-431,000	+449,000

Wisconsin	+22,748	-48,000	+140,000
North Carolina	+173,315	-73,000	+524,000
Michigan	+10,704	-248,000	+381,000
Georgia	+211,141	-81,000	+542,000
Florida	+112,911	-359,000	+1,579,000
Arizona	+91,234	+45,000	+498,000
Iowa	+147,314	-58,000	+72,000

Source: Census Current Population Survey, University of Minnesota historic data collection

Recent pandemic-related difficulties in reaching survey respondents by the Census may overstate the current white population, according to Jeffrey Passel, senior demographer at the Pew Research Center. “So you may be understating the change,” he said, especially for Hispanics and other people of color.

The impact of age

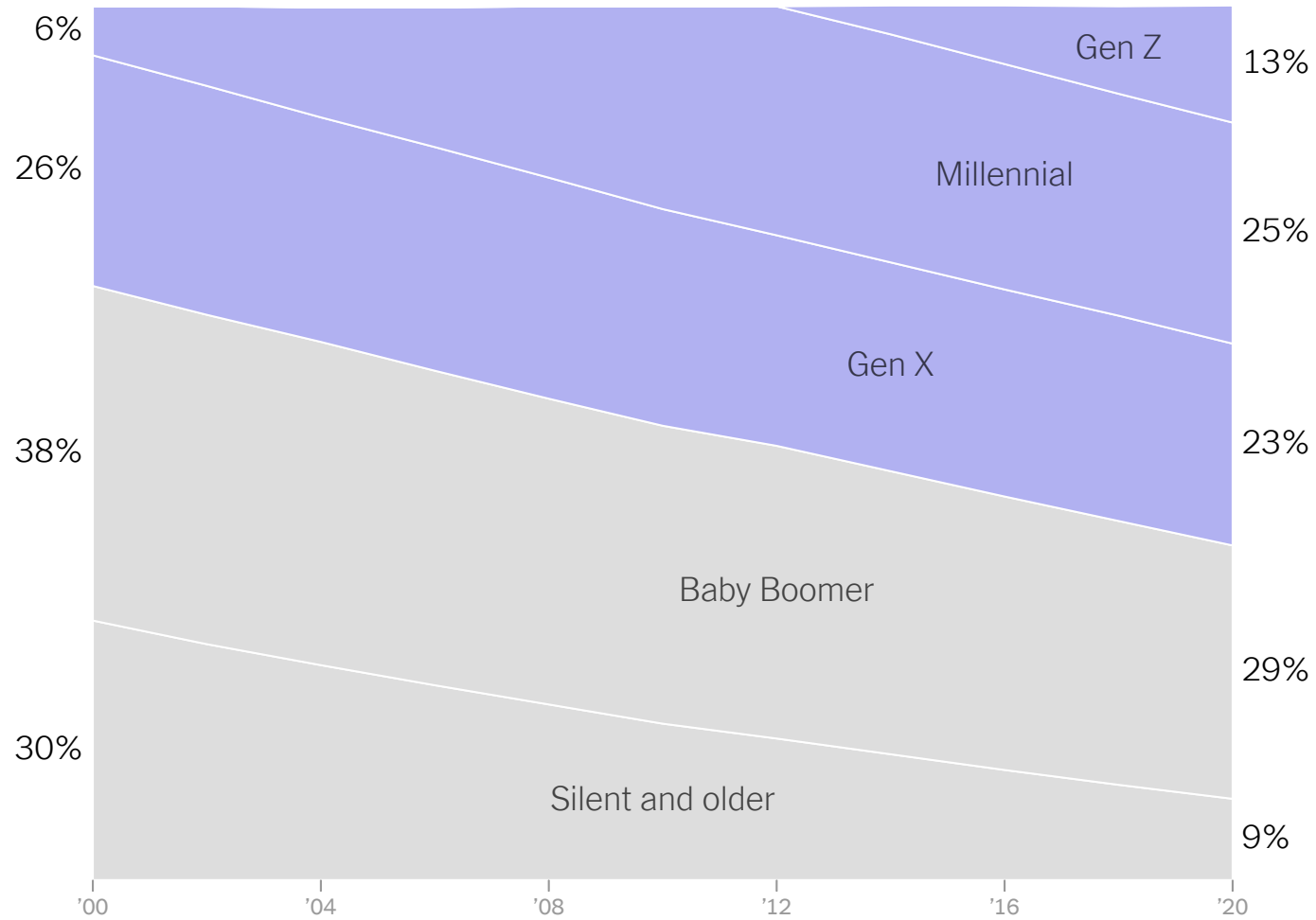
The changes in demographics are driven largely by aging: The white blue-collar cohort is older and steadily declining as its

members die. The Biden coalition is younger and aging into the electorate.

So the changes are mostly at the margins: Those in the silent and older generations are being replaced by younger voters from Gen Z who tend to be better educated, much more Hispanic and generally more liberal. Baby boomers, Gen Xers and millennials will make up about the same proportion of the electorate in 2020 as in 2016.

Share of voters by generation

Share of Voters by Generation



Source: Census Current Population Survey, University of Minnesota historic data collection

The good news for Mr. Trump is that young voters are much less reliable voters — their turnout rate was 15 points below average in 2016. And although the silent generation has [recently turned](#)

[unfavorable](#) toward him in the [polls](#), its decline in the voting population might hurt him less.

Beyond 2020, these trends foreshadow further strengthening of both minority and college-educated white cohorts at the expense of white blue-collar voters.

“Over time these underlying shifts are really quite potent,” Mr. Teixeira said, “and would suggest that just getting rid of Trump may not be enough for the Republicans to right the ship.”

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