# Introduction

## *What Is the Sunbelt – and Why Is It Important?*

This book is about the political culture of the American Sunbelt since the end of World War II. At the heart of this story is the rise of a powerful Republican Party, increasingly detached from its establishment roots on the East Coast, shaped by grassroots organizers and business leaders in rapidly growing metropolitan communities, and fueled by an ideological conservatism that employed a populist style to champion an agenda for free enterprise, limited government, low taxes, strong national defense, fervent patriotism, and traditional family values. As a result of these and other converging factors, the Sunbelt emerged during the second half of the twentieth century as the undisputed geographic epicenter for conservative Republican power in the United States.

Yet, at the same time, the political culture of the American Sunbelt – or perhaps more accurately, the history of American politics in the postwar Sunbelt – is also a story of contestation. At different moments and with varying degrees of success, leftist radicals, reformist progressives, establishment liberals, pragmatic moderates, and even some conservatives used the Democratic Party, as well as other organizations, to fight against this Republican ascendancy. Sometimes these groups were successful. Sometimes they were not. But the conservative Republican ascendancy that so many have identified as almost synonymous with the rise of

the postwar American Sunbelt was hardly an easy, unobstructed victory march. Rather, it was consistently challenged and never foreordained. The history of American politics in the postwar Sunbelt resembles a rollercoaster of partisan and ideological adaptation and transformation. This book seeks to tell that story.

## WHAT IS THE SUNBELT?

One of this book's central arguments is that the emergence of the Sunbelt has been a pivotal factor in the evolving nature of modern American politics since 1945. It is not the first book to make such an argument. Journalists and political analysts have been discussing the growing power of the Sunbelt since at least the late 1970s, if not earlier. Social scientists began to examine these trends more frequently during the 1980s and early 1990s. Then, beginning in the mid-1990s – but especially since 2001 – the Sunbelt began to receive significantly more attention from historians. This was particularly true among historians interested in explaining the rise of modern American conservatism and the growth of the Republican Party. In fact, during most of the 2000s, the study of modern conservatism, principally as it evolved in the Sunbelt, was one of the trendiest research fields in all of academia.[1]

[1] Studies of the Republican ascendancy have generally seen Reagan's victory in 1980 as a climactic moment in the rise of modern conservatism. The literature on this political shift is vast. For examples, see John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Michael D. Bowen, *The Roots of Modern Conservatism: Dewey, Taft, and the Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sean P. Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of the Modern*

Such trendiness aside, the recent attention scholars have paid to the relationship between political change and regional identity – in this case, the relationship between conservatism and the Sunbelt – hardly represents a new approach to the study of political history in the United States. On the contrary, scholars have been interested in the regional dynamics of American politics for as long as there has been scholarly interest in America. Take, for instance, studies of the U.S. South. As a region with a distinctive culture, character, economy, and political history, the South – commonly defined as the collection of states that seceded from the Union in 1860 and 1861 – has received enormous scholarly attention over the decades, and deservedly so. After all, the nation fought a bloody civil war from 1861 to 1865 in reaction to that secession, and it did so largely because of unresolved competition and incompatibility between two seemingly distinct regions – the North and the South.[2] Meanwhile, scholars have also paid considerable

*Right* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974–1980* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008); Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a comprehensive examination of this literature, see Kim Phillips-Fein et al., "Conservatism: A Roundtable." *Journal of American History*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (December 2011), pp. 723–773.

[2] The historiography on the South is also vast, and the literature on the South's experience during the Civil War even more so. For more on southern identity and heritage before, during, and after the Civil War, see among many others, David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History* (Cambridge,

attention to the unique regional identity of the American West. Rarely, however, have those scholars managed to agree on what "West" actually means. In fact, competing definitions of "West" – in the sense of both its geographical borders and its intangible character – have been the driving force behind much of the ongoing research into that region's history. That research not only reflects the conversation that historians continue to have about the true nature of the West, but in many ways also frames the almost never-ending debate about the character and identity of the United States as a whole.[3]

In many ways, the historical construction of an identifiable "Sunbelt" owes a debt of gratitude to these scholarly traditions. Today, thanks in part to academic interest in competing regional identities within the United States, most contemporaries at least recognize the existence of a region known as the Sunbelt; journalists still refer to it regularly, political analysts still account for its influence, and scholars have now written about it extensively. But

MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); James Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979); Lacy K. Ford Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978); William A. Link, *Atlanta, Cradle of the New South: Race and Remembering in the Civil War's Aftermath* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Eric Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

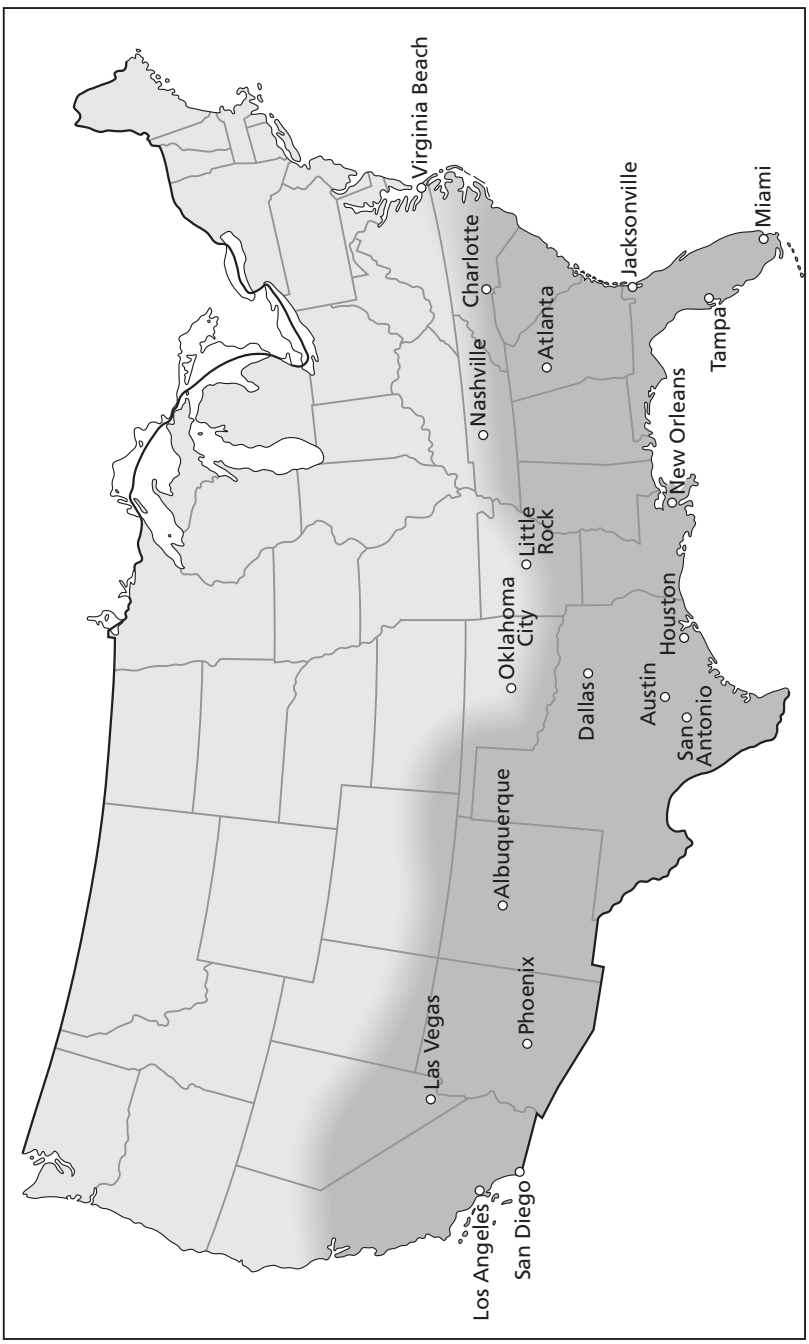
[3] For examples, see Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); Gary J. Hausladen, *Western Places, American Myths: How We Think About the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006); Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); and Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For a specific example of the "New Western" historiography, see among others, Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987).

acknowledging its existence or even researching its history and culture is not the same as providing a clear definition. Therefore, it is still important to ask and answer a deceptively complex question: What is the Sunbelt?

The term "Sunbelt" first became part of America's mainstream political lexicon in 1969 when Kevin Phillips coined it in his highly influential book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*. Phillips, a former campaign strategist for Richard Nixon, used the term to describe an ambiguously defined southern half of the continental United States that stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific and shared common economic interests in oil, agribusiness, defense, and technology. At its simplest level, this definition works. When most Americans think of the Sunbelt, they usually picture a loose merger of the South and the West, highlighted by modern and economically vibrant states such as California, Texas, and Florida, as well as young but growing cities such as Los Angeles, Phoenix, Dallas, and Atlanta.[4]

On a deeper level, however, this definition lacks complexity. It is easy enough to highlight broad swathes of the American map, recognize a few common characteristics, and assume that some sort of coherent regional identity exists. But the reality is not so simple. Take, for instance, the Sunbelt's geographic dimensions. Does an unbroken region that connects California to Florida require that all parts in between share a common political, social, or economic culture? Is New Mexico part of the Sunbelt? What about Mississippi or Alabama? How far north does the Sunbelt extend? Does it include Utah, Colorado, Arkansas, or Virginia? After all, Richmond – the capital of Virginia – is much closer to

[4] Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969). The Sunbelt as a regional concept was also promoted with some lasting significance in Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenges to the Eastern Establishment* (New York: Random House, 1975). For a more nuanced discussion of these two works and of the Sunbelt as a regional concept, see Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 1–28.




Major Cities of the Sunbelt

New York City in terms of mileage than it is to Atlanta, Georgia, the city on the East Coast most widely considered to be quintessentially Sunbelt.

In response to these and similar questions, it could be suggested that the Sunbelt's geographic identity is actually rooted in the similarities of its largest and most dynamic metropolitan centers. Texas, for instance, is always included in popular conceptions of the Sunbelt, not because of its mostly unsettled trans-Pecos frontier or the agricultural quilting of its Panhandle, but rather because of the expansive growth of megalopolises such as Dallas and Houston, which have thrived because of developments in oil, finance, real estate, and technology. Other metropolitan centers typically identified as Sunbelt include San Diego, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Miami, and Atlanta. Cities such as Tucson, Austin, San Antonio, Oklahoma City, Nashville, Jacksonville, Tampa, and Charlotte are also often included on such lists, as are many others. Thinking in these terms, the Sunbelt seems less like a vast region of connected states and more like an archipelago of metropolises that have experienced rapid growth during roughly the same decades as a result of roughly the same economic forces, populated by individuals living in roughly similar suburban and exurban developments.[5]

If the Sunbelt's existence as an identifiable region depends on the shared characteristics of its largest cities, then it is also fair to ask whether a proper understanding of the Sunbelt might actually depend more on economics than geography. Certainly the term "Sunbelt" implies that warm weather is an important aspect of the region's identity. But heat and lack of water have long been impediments to population growth and economic

[5] Additional studies dealing with the question of Sunbelt identity include Carl Abbott, *The New Urban America: Growth and Politics in Sunbelt Cities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Nickerson and Dochuk, *Sunbelt Rising*; and Bernard L. Weinstein and Robert E. Firestine, *Regional Growth and Decline in the United States: The Rise of the Sunbelt and the Decline of the Northeast* (New York: Praeger, 1978).

diversification, at least so far as the arid West (especially Southwest) was concerned. What changed after 1945? One of the many technological developments that undoubtedly contributed to the Sunbelt's formation and economic growth was the advent of air conditioning. Taming the heat was a prerequisite for significant population growth, and population growth was a corequisite for economic development. There is little question that managed cold air – along with advances in hydroelectric power, water conservation, and irrigation – helped make Sunbelt growth possible.

Technological advancements such as these provided an economic boon to the Sunbelt, but such advancements were not alone in shaping regional economic expansion. Federal defense contracts were also critically important. The Sunbelt cities and states that experienced the most significant population growth in the decades after World War II also typically shared a stronger-than-average reliance on federal defense contracts. Those contracts were most often awarded to companies located in metropolitan areas where proactive civic leaders and economic developers had taken a more aggressive approach to attracting new businesses by creating entrepreneurial climates popularly perceived as conducive to free enterprise. Despite being characteristically hostile to labor unions, the cities, states, and companies that won these contracts attracted tens of thousands of new employees for jobs in high-tech, aerospace, and defense industries.

Many of these industries were designed, at least in part, to strengthen national security. When workers in these industries moved from other parts of the country into Sunbelt cities, they also typically used federally subsidized loans to purchase new houses, many of which had been mass-produced in modern tract developments. In turn, the booming housing market fueled new retail and commercial construction, which required new and expanded banking and financial markets and, cyclically, new jobs. Responding to the region's population growth and related need for new housing, the federal government also subsidized the construction of new highways. Those highways were quickly crowded with new automobiles, all of which required lots of

gasoline, thereby increasing the demand for – and contributing to the rising price of – oil.[6]

As a result of these combined factors, Sunbelt cities grew quickly in the decades after World War II as metropolitan economies diversified, modernized, and expanded. And unlike older cities in the Northeast such as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, these Sunbelt metropolises became more expansively broad than tall; they tended to spread out, not up. This, too, became a hallmark of Sunbelt modernity – vast, sprawling, commercial, and residential development generously networked by federally funded highways and abundantly dotted with automobiles, all of which made concerns such as the traveling distance between home and workplace far less relevant than such concerns had been for earlier generations. These growing distances between home and work also widened the expanding cultural chasm between the daily experiences of those living in suburbs and those left behind in the inner cities.[7]

It seems, therefore, that defining the Sunbelt along both geographic and economic lines makes sense, at least to a certain point. Warm-weather states in the southern half of the continental United States disproportionately benefited from wartime and postwar

[6] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 106–109.

[7] The best recent study of the relationship between business and politics is Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009). For more on the general economic development of the Sunbelt South and West, see, for example, Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980: The Story of the South's Modernization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910–1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Gerald D. Nash, *The Federal Landscape: An Economic History of the Twentieth-Century West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); and Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, & the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For more on suburbanization, see Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

defense contracts, federally funded research and development, new housing construction, and technological advances like air conditioning, all of which combined to result in a significant infusion of both population and economic power to previously underdeveloped areas. As those cities and states become larger and more economically modern, the Sunbelt developed a semblance of regional identity and gained political power.

But geographic and economic commonalities across the Sunbelt can be overstated. Sunbelt cities and states no doubt looked similar when seen from a distance, but a tighter focus reveals important distinctions. The Sunbelt's heterogeneity is reflected, for instance, in Arizona's proximity to the Mexican border, along with its substantial and largely impoverished Native American population. These unique traits have created a multiethnic political and socioeconomic environment very different from Georgia's, for example – just one case of a former Confederate state that has long functioned within a much more rigidly "black-white" racial context than has Arizona or any other state in the Southwest, for that matter. Or, one could look at Florida. Since 1945, the Sunshine State's economy has been far more dependent on tourism, leisure, and the relocation of retirees than that of most other Sunbelt states. Meanwhile in Texas, oil functioned like an economic Goliath, creating pockets of extravagant wealth and power that functioned in ways largely unique to the rest of the region and country. Elsewhere, North Carolina's federally supported Research Triangle – which connected powerful corporations with universities in Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh – did not stifle or limit the proliferation of diverse political ideas – quite the opposite, in fact. A mere decade into the twenty-first century, the North Carolina Research Triangle – dotted with what John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira have called "postindustrial metropolises" – was one of the most solidly Democratic areas in the nation, emblematic of the emerging "progressive centrism" at the heart of Barack Obama's popular appeal with young, middle-class voters in both 2008 and 2012. The same could be said of similar postindustrial metropolises elsewhere in the Sunbelt, including those near Silicon Valley – California's high-tech hub. Analogous political cultures