

Sunbelt

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The sunbelt phenomenon resulted from a massive post-World War II migration of people from the Northeast and Midwest to emerging metropolitan areas in the South and Southwest. Reversing historical out-migration from the rural South to industrial centers in the urban North and Midwest, this population shift to the Southern half of the United States is one of the more significant domestic migrations in American history. Most accounts of the sunbelt agree on the region's warm climates, economic expansion, and political conservatism, although many disagree about the boundaries, significance, and actual existence of the region. Official government agencies, including the US Census Bureau and the US Postal Service, do not identify the sunbelt as a distinct region or unit and continue using traditional regional constructs. The term appears in popular periodicals and academic publications as well as in business recruitment and real estate advertising, bringing attention to the prominence of the South and West and to the growth of cities and metropolitan areas in the region.

Journalists and scholars have been willing to redefine traditional regional boundaries and track shifting demographic and economic trends for decades, legitimating the use of sunbelt as an analytical concept for understanding a dynamic political-economic space. The concept of sunbelt also delineates a culturally defined space where diverse identities, beliefs, accents, and ideals capture local, regional, and national attention. The sunbelt has become a useful term for

understanding alliances, real and imaginary, between the South and the Southwest. These alliances intensified in the second half of the twentieth century, affecting national urban transformations associated with the growth of new metropolitan centers and cultural shifts associated with political realignment. Awareness of a transnational sunbelt is also increasing because of the movement of people and goods across the region's shared border with Mexico. The growth of two binational metropolitan areas – San Diego–Tijuana (population 5 million) and El Paso–Juárez (population 3 million) is associated with the transnational movement of people and goods as well as with US military installations on one side of the border and *maquiladoras* on the other. Latino/a immigration to the Southwest and to new destinations in the South since the 1980s also characterizes the transnational sunbelt.

The sunbelt's spatial boundaries are imprecise and contested, but most observers include the area below the 36th parallel spanning the southeastern seaboard states from North Carolina and extending westward to southern California. Generally observers and boosters contrast what they describe as an increasing economic growth, social progressivism, and racial amity in the sunbelt with economic stagnation, deindustrialization, and racial enmity in the rustbelt or frostbelt. Others, however, challenge these dichotomies, countering that (1) growth has not occurred uniformly throughout the sunbelt; (2) pro-business policies and rapid suburbanization have produced or reproduced social hierarchies and inequalities of wealth and power throughout the region; and (3) deregulation and sprawl have exacerbated social and environmental problems.

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Kevin Phillips introduced the term “sunbelt” in *The Emerging Republican Majority* (Phillips 1969), which focuses on the growing electoral strength of the region and on the emergence of a conservative majority. He recognized the region’s potential for political realignment, particularly as the one-party South ceased to be a Democratic stronghold, presaging the national rise of the Republican Party. Phillips identified the revolutionary potential of a new form of conservatism espousing a pro-growth, pro-family, pro-defense, pro-business, anti-labor, anti-New Deal agenda. Other writers, beginning with Kirkpatrick Sale (1975) in his book *Power Shift*, considered the emergence of the “southern rim” as a political and economic powerhouse to be a threat to progressive political traditions. Associated with a national shift in population and economic investment to the South and West and with the dominance of conservative political philosophies and candidates in state and national elections, the rise of the sunbelt has become a political and economic force since the 1970s.

THE SUNBELT ECONOMY

The rise of the sunbelt coincides with an era of global capital flight from Northern and Midwestern industrial strongholds to historically less industrialized regions in the United States and overseas. The agency and activism of state and local officials who promoted a more favorable business climate, offering lower corporate taxes and nonunion wages, persuaded some business firms to relocate to the sunbelt. No doubt the appeal of right-to-work legislation, which made it harder to unionize workers, the availability of cheap land for expansion, and tax abatements as well as other concessions offered by state and local governments attracted business relocation and investments in new facilities

away from unionized industrial centers. But the emergence of a postwar economy based on high tech consumer electronics, research and development, aerospace, oil and gas extraction, and the growth of global tourism heightened interregional competition. The prospects of shorter and warmer winters and air-conditioning-cooled summers made the climate more welcoming to developing new industries and forms of prosperity in new industrial and residential spaces.

Federal infrastructure investments laid the groundwork for the rise of the sunbelt, priming the South and the Southwest for postwar investment. During the 1930s, when these underdeveloped peripheral regions lacked significant manufacturing, New Deal public works programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Hoover Dam provided electricity and irrigation services to the South and Southwest. These improvements helped attract industries, reducing the South’s dependence on agriculture and the West’s dependence on ranching and mining. Federal defense spending also affected regional shifts of economic investment. Prior to World War II, federal defense policy allocated more military installations and production contracts to industrial centers located in the Northeast and in the Midwest. During the war, warm weather coastal cities became naval centers and inland cities in the South and Southwest offered spaces for training troops, testing airplanes, and developing nuclear power capabilities. Afterwards, especially with the growth of the military–industrial complex throughout the Cold War era, the sunbelt continued reaping a disproportional share of defense spending.

New Deal programs, defense spending, and other federal programs affected not only the population shift to the southern tier of the United States, but also the spatial configuration of development. The

Interstate Highway Act of 1956, the Federal Housing Administration, and the GI Bill subsidized the dreams of middle-class families to become homeowners and financed the development of postwar suburbs clustered around military bases, defense industries, and relocated corporate offices and plants. Sunbelt cities and metropolitan areas benefited, especially those whose civic leaders leveraged federal funds as well as state and local incentives to build impressive downtowns and to attract industry. Atlanta built a rapid rail transit system with federal assistance and prospered with the growth of the defense industry. Houston gained from the Johnson Space Center and from federal subsidies that enhanced its port. Charlotte became a branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond in 1927, and this paved the way for Charlotte to become a financial center. Phoenix emerged as the headquarters city of the Southwest through postwar recruitment and investment. Social security as well as military and other government employee retirement programs helped make it possible for retirees to relocate to warmer climates, boosting populations in Florida, Arizona, and other retirement locales.

Sunbelt city growth also benefited from economic diversification. As oil fields boomed in Texas and Oklahoma, Houston and Oklahoma City thrived. The state capital cities of Austin, Raleigh, and Nashville have grown as centers of research and development. Raleigh benefited from the Research Triangle Park and from university collaborations. Austin grew with consumer electronics, financial services, and university research. Nashville's economy is associated with the healthcare industry and financial services, nearby military installations, and the entertainment industry. The aerospace industry and military installations flourished in southern California, especially San Diego. The parts of sunbelt also known for leisure and

tourism industries include Las Vegas, center of gaming and entertainment surrounded by suburban sprawl, as well as Disney theme parks and other tourist attractions in California and Florida. Not surprisingly, both commercial and residential construction boomed in the sunbelt before the 2007–2009 recession and mortgage crisis.

Sunbelt migration subsided during the Great Recession, which prompted speculation about future shifts. With economic recovery, however, sunbelt migration and economic growth has resumed, albeit not at the same pace as in 2005. Once again, out-migration from snowbelt states is increasing. New York, New Jersey, and Illinois are the biggest population losers. Meanwhile, for the first time in history, the three most populous states in the nation are sunbelt states: California, Texas, and Florida. If these growth rates continue, by 2030 nearly two out of three Americans will live in the sunbelt.

The most influential cities in the United States – New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles – are now the biggest population losers. As of 2015, all of the 11 large metropolitan areas in the United States with the greatest population gains are located in the sunbelt. These areas include four cities (metropolitan statistical areas [MSAs]) in Texas – Houston, Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio – and two in Florida – Tampa and Orlando (Frey 2015).

For the first time in US history, two of the five largest cities (MSAs) of the nation are in Texas. Dallas-Fort Worth is ranked 4th, with nearly 7 million people, and Houston ranks 5th, with a population of 6.5 million. Houston is often described as the cultural and economic center of the sunbelt; it also surpasses New York in having the most ethnically and racially diverse population. The Houston MSA (Houston–Woodlands–Sugar Land) is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States, and Houston has become the number one city in the nation for

corporate expansions, primarily owing to the growth of its energy industry.

SUNBELT SCHOLARSHIP

Most scholarly literature continues to be regionally specific despite selective and widespread use of the term sunbelt. Before the idea of sunbelt emerged, many scholars viewed the South from a social problems framework. Influenced by a regional focus on rural studies and by President Franklin Roosevelt's description of the South as the nation's number one economic problem, scholars tended to view the South as backward or underdeveloped, and they searched for regional evidence of its catching up economically and becoming more urban and more progressive. They also studied the Great Migration and the population exodus away from the South to urban industrial centers in the United States. Southern historians and sociologists who used the term sunbelt in the 1970s and 1980s typically focused on changes occurring in Southern states and communities since World War II. Many framed their analysis in terms of Southern exceptionalism, a perspective that emphasizes "internal" historical factors and views the South as inherently different from the United States, in spite of changes in economic investment and educational attainment. Some scholars made use of an Old South–New South dichotomy to contrast metropolitan growth, challenges to old elites, and perceived progressivism primarily in Southeastern states with features in other states, identified with the Confederacy. But booms in Florida and Texas complicated those studies and frameworks. Postwar prosperity, the civil rights movement, suburbanization, reverse domestic migration, international immigration, and research on globalization spurred interest in the South and Southwest from different perspectives.

Use of the name sunbelt South allowed scholars to frame research and the region somewhat differently. Initially, some cities and metropolitan areas – including Atlanta, Tampa, Miami, and Austin – were deemed more "progressive," and perhaps less Southern, than a few others. Some research called attention to the contradictions of low wages and educational attainment existing in the region alongside the growth of better-paying jobs and better-educated workers, contesting the narrative that in some ways perhaps the sunbelt South was not that different from the Old South. Along with Latino/a immigration to new destinations in the Southeast, a new concept appeared: the Nuevo South. And, as new barriers to civic and economic participation emerged, Juan Crow joined Jim Crow.

Sunbelt scholarship also encompasses research on southern California and the Southwest. Some scholars examine connections to the global political economy along with the complications and inequities associated with it. Davis's *City of Quartz* shows how Los Angeles achieved dominance in Pacific Rim commerce while perpetuating social exclusion, marginalization, and increasing economic inequality. Eliot Tretter's (2016) *Shadows of a Sunbelt City* looks critically at Austin. Often treated as a model of creative class cities, Austin touts its success at attracting the "creative class" and high technology workers. But Tretter critically challenges the dominant narrative of Austin's progressivism with accounts of racial, class, and environmental struggles. And the essays collected in Auyero's (2015) *Invisible in Austin* unearth stories of inequality, relating struggles of low-wage service workers. Elizabeth Shermer's (2011) *Sunbelt Capitalism* explains the transformation of Phoenix from a small town of 10,000 into a major city of more than 4 million and into a national symbol of sunbelt prosperity. Shermer also explains the

paradoxes of benefiting economically from state and federally funded infrastructure while challenging those funds with the ideology of free-enterprise conservatism found in the Southwest and the South. And Tyina Steptoe's (2015) *Houston Bound* investigates the complexities generated by the convergence of different racial and ethnic minorities through migration and immigration in a former city of the Confederacy.

THE FUTURE

For the past 40 years, population shifts to the sunbelt have increased the political and economic power of southern and western states in Washington. Congressional reapportionment shifted seats to the sunbelt and to the suburbs, benefiting conservative majorities in Congress. The political dominance of the region will likely continue for some time. In the presidential elections held between 1964 and 2000, all seven winners were from the sunbelt. The election of a peanut farmer/nuclear engineer, cowboy governor/movie star, and Connecticut yankee/Texas oilman symbolized a range of sunbelt characters and possibilities in pursuit of electoral majorities, capturing the national imagination. Not surprisingly, the 2016 presidential race includes candidates who are the children of Latino/a immigrants and one whose spouse is a Latina immigrant.

Despite considerable optimism about a progressive sunbelt, residents of the region have not escaped many of the social problems they or their forebears experienced in the Northern snowbelt or "South of the Border." Prosperous cities like Atlanta continue to have high poverty rates. Economic downturns associated with the oil and gas industry, financial market, and other global phenomena affect unemployment rates, housing availability, and educational opportunity. Many

sunbelt cities and communities struggle with suburban sprawl, traffic congestion, pollution and no longer offer an oasis from urban challenges. Anti-immigration legislation in some states – especially Arizona and Alabama – fuel national debates about immigration. Some sunbelt cities have suffered population stagnation and decline, as has happened in Memphis and New Orleans. The sunbelt and its pockets of prosperity and poverty will continue to fascinate social scientists, historians, and journalists. Because of shifts in population and power, their consequences for policies ranging from education to urban planning, and the transformative processes of migration and immigration, debates about the significance of the region will continue.

SEE ALSO: Creative Class; Deindustrialization; Globalization; Regional Development; Rustbelt; Sprawl; Suburbanization

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