

# The 1970s: Identity Politics

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

The 1970s, often referred to as the “forgotten decade” by historians, witnessed continued efforts for—and reactions against—identity politics. They also marked the end of post-World War II economic growth. As a result, the identity politics and cultural movements of the decade took place as the economy stagnated.

This tutorial examines the politics, culture, and economy of 1970s America in four parts:

## 1. The Sun Belt and the Silent Majority

**Richard Nixon**’s victory in the 1968 election was not accidental. After losing the 1960 election to John F. Kennedy and losing a 1962 bid to be the governor of California, Nixon worked tirelessly to make himself a candidate who would appeal to mainstream voters. He also campaigned on behalf of other Republican candidates, building support within the growing conservative movement in the Republican Party.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### **Richard Nixon**

Conservative Republican politician who won the tumultuous presidential election of 1968 by appealing to a “silent majority” of Americans who looked unfavorably upon the social upheaval of the 1960s and by promising an honorable exit from Vietnam.

➔ **EXAMPLE** During the 1964 presidential election, Nixon strongly supported conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

Goldwater lost the 1964 election to **Lyndon Johnson**, whose administration implemented the **Great Society** reform program.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### **Lyndon B. Johnson**

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969 whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Great Society

Lyndon Johnson's plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States and to improve the lives of all Americans.

Goldwater's rejection of the welfare state, social legislation, and federal spending on domestic programs, along with his support for states' rights, was popular with a growing number of political and intellectual conservatives and with White Southern politicians who opposed federal efforts to enforce racial integration. Based on Goldwater's experience, Nixon employed a **Southern strategy** during the 1968 presidential campaign.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Southern Strategy

Nixon's political strategy that called for appeals to Southern Whites by resisting calls for greater federal enforcement of civil rights.

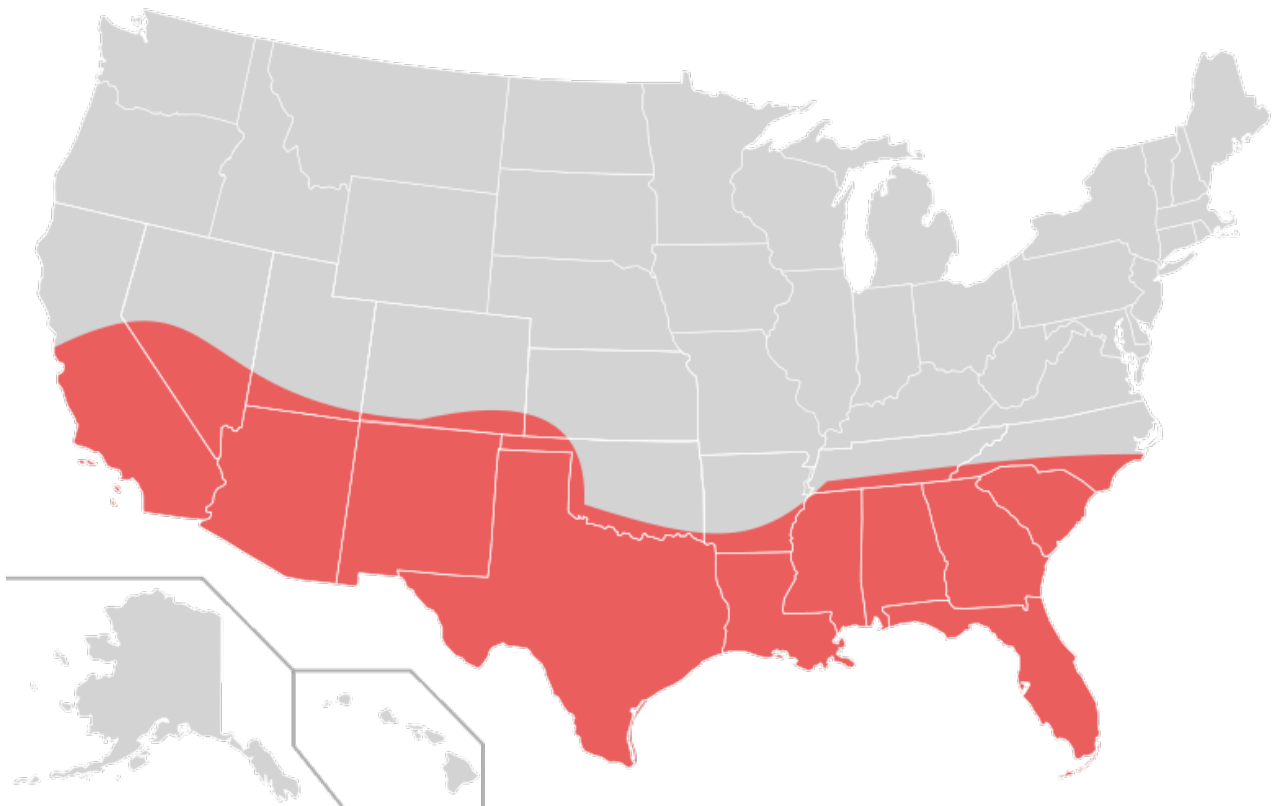
Nixon denounced segregation and the denial of the right to vote for African Americans, but he also maintained that Southern states had the right to implement racial equality at their own pace. This message resonated not only among conservatives in the South but also with a growing number of suburban homeowners in the **Sun Belt**.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Sun Belt

Southern and Southwestern region of the United States.



The Sun Belt stretches from California to Texas to Florida.

The political influence of the Sun Belt grew steadily during the mid-20th century as defense industries, corporate agribusinesses, oil companies, and leisure/tourist businesses expanded their operations in the region. As Americans moved into suburban neighborhoods surrounding Los Angeles, Phoenix, Houston, and other cities, the Sun Belt emerged as the center of the nation's economic and technological progress.

The Sun Belt became the home of a Southern White culture that rejected the outlook of the liberal coalition behind the Great Society and the social movements based on identity politics. The popularity of country music and Southern rock during the 1970s reflected this trend.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" reached #8 on the American music charts in 1974.

During the 1968 presidential campaign, and throughout his administration, Richard Nixon portrayed himself as the champion of a "middle America" that was fed up with the social convulsions of the **anti-war movement** and **identity politics**.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Anti-War Movement

The movement against the Vietnam War.

##### Identity Politics

Political movements or actions intended to further the interests of a particular group based on culture, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, or sexual orientation.

In addition to Southern Whites and suburban residents of the Sun Belt, this message appealed to Northern middle-class and blue-collar voters who felt that their interests were being neglected by the Democratic Party. Nixon collectively referred to these Americans as the **silent majority**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Silent Majority

Richard Nixon's term for his political supporters whose voices he believed were being drowned out by those protesting for change during the 1960s.

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## 2. The Limits of School Desegregation

One of the core issues for the silent majority was the racial integration of public schools. Almost 20 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court and the federal government searched for ways to implement school desegregation in the United States.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1968, two thirds of all Southern Black children attended schools that had no White students (Henretta, 2012).

In the 1971 case *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the Supreme Court approved a plan to use buses to transport Black and White students across district lines to desegregate schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. Following the court's decision, federal judges ordered the implementation of similar **busing** plans in other cities.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Busing

The forced transport of children to schools outside of their neighborhoods or districts to achieve desegregation.

Busing sometimes required students to travel long distances across district lines to achieve racial balance in city schools. Black children, who attended inner-city public schools in which most students were Black, were bused to predominantly White schools in the suburbs, and vice versa.

To the surprise of busing advocates, resistance to the program came from the residents of Northern cities, where residential segregation was strongest. During the 1970s, White residents in Boston affiliated with Restore Our Alienated Schools (ROAR) opposed a court-mandated program that required the busing of White students to a school in a predominantly Black neighborhood.

Throughout his time in office, President Nixon consistently opposed busing as a way to achieve racial desegregation. In March 1970, he commented that he did not believe that the United States had to be fully integrated, maintaining that it was “natural” for members of ethnic or racial groups to live together in their own enclaves.

Faced with growing local opposition to busing programs, the federal courts gradually abandoned the initiative.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In the 1974 case *Milliken v. Bradley*, the Supreme Court overturned a court order that would have required residents of Detroit’s predominantly White suburbs to participate in a busing program with Detroit’s inner-city school districts, which were predominantly Black.

For members of the silent majority, the busing program was a dramatic example of federal overreach to achieve integration. In response to court-ordered busing, some White parents moved their families to suburbs that were not subject to busing or other enforced integration programs, a process also known as “White flight.” Other parents enrolled their children in private schools, which were not subject to federal integration requirements. Both of these trends decreased enrollment in inner-city public schools, which reduced funding for those schools.

The *Milliken* decision and the abandonment of court-mandated busing ensured that residential segregation in American neighborhoods would be reflected in public education. Recent statistics suggest that residential segregation has continued through the late 20th and into the 21st century. In 1974, 45,000 White students were enrolled in Boston’s public schools. By 1987, that number had dropped to 16,000.



#### MAKE THE CONNECTION

In the 2016–2017 school year, only 14% of Boston public school students were White. The majority of students in Boston’s public school system were Hispanic.

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## 3. The Sexual Revolution

As school desegregation efforts met resistance and faltered, identity politics associated with gender and sexuality moved into the mainstream of American society.



In 1970, supporters of equal rights for women marched in Washington, DC.

Feminism, or women’s liberation, continued throughout the 1970s. Although President Nixon, members of his administration, and the media sometimes ridiculed feminists as “women’s libbers” or focused on their more radical demands, the feminist movement made some notable accomplishments during the decade.

At the local level, feminist organizations established shelters for women suffering from domestic abuse. They also successfully fought employment discrimination against pregnant women and supported legal reform regarding rape (e.g., the abolition of laws requiring a witness to corroborate a woman’s report of rape). They also called for the criminalization of domestic violence.

At the federal level, advances in women’s rights were partly the result of women’s political participation, including participation in Congress. **Patsy Mink**, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, coauthored the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (also known as Title IX), which prohibits gender discrimination in public education.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Mink and other women who sought and won political office during the 1970s received support from the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC). The NWPC was founded in 1971 by Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and other feminists to encourage women to seek office, raise money for their campaigns, and be elected.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Patsy Mink

The first Asian American woman elected to Congress and coauthor of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, also known as Title IX, which prohibits gender discrimination in public education.



(a)



(b)

Patsy Mink (a), a Japanese American from Hawaii, was the first Asian American woman elected to the House of Representatives. During her successful 1970 congressional campaign, Bella Abzug of New York (b) declared, “This woman’s place is in the House . . . the House of Representatives!”

Some of the victories on behalf of women’s liberation in the courts reflected new trends in sexual behavior among single men and women. In 1972, the Supreme Court expanded Americans’ right to privacy when it struck down a Massachusetts law that prohibited the sale of contraceptives to single people. The sale of contraceptives to married couples had been affirmed by the Supreme Court in 1965.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the *Roe v. Wade* case (1973), the Supreme Court ruled that state laws prohibiting women’s access to abortion during the early stages of pregnancy were unconstitutional. The ruling made abortion a legal medical procedure nationwide. The *Roe v. Wade* decision outraged many Americans, including Catholics and evangelical Christians, who continue to seek ways to have it overturned.

The call for gay men and women to “come out” (i.e., to reveal their sexual orientation) revealed another growing change in views regarding sexual values. During the 1970s, some gay and lesbian communities moved from the urban underground into open political participation. Gay rights activists protested job loss and other forms of discrimination, which resulted, in part, from the American Psychiatric Association’s categorization of homosexuality as a mental illness.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Following gay rights protests, the American Psychiatric Association reclassified homosexuality from a form of mental illness to a “sexual orientation disturbance” in 1974. The association continued to consider it a “sexual orientation disturbance” until the mid-1980s.



Like those who participated in the women's liberation movement, gay rights activists organized to elect candidates to local office. Once elected, these officials worked to persuade city and state governments to decriminalize homosexuality and pass antidiscrimination laws. In 1974, Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly lesbian woman elected to office in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1977, **Harvey Milk** became California's first openly gay man to be elected to public office. Milk's term on San Francisco's board of supervisors, along with that of San Franciscan Mayor George Moscone, ended when he was killed by disgruntled former city supervisor Dan White.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Harvey Milk

The first openly gay man elected to public office in California with his election in 1977 to San Francisco's board of supervisors.

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## 4. Stagflation

The busing controversy and the sexual revolution occurred during a time of economic stagnation and increasing inflation.

The United States had been experiencing uninterrupted economic growth since the end of World War II. However, beginning in the late 1960s, inflation (i.e., a general rise in prices) and declining wages reduced the purchasing power of consumers and curtailed economic growth. By the middle of 1970, the United States was in an economic recession, and unemployment reached 6.2%—twice the level it had been during the 1960s.

Increased federal spending on the Vietnam War and the Great Society's social programs contributed to inflation. The recession was also the result of declining industrial productivity and increased competition from Japan, West Germany, and other nations that had successfully rebuilt after World War II.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1971, the United States experienced a *trade deficit* (i.e., it imported more goods than it exported) for the first time in the 20th century.

Like some of his predecessors, including Democrats Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon resorted to **deficit spending** in response to the economic crisis.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Deficit Spending

Government spending that exceeds revenue and is financed through borrowing, rather than through taxation.

To stimulate greater investment and job creation by pumping more federal funds into the economy, Nixon proposed a federal budget that included an \$11 billion deficit in 1971. When the unemployment rate failed to improve the following year, he proposed a budget with a \$25 billion deficit.

At the same time, the president attempted to halt inflation by freezing wages and prices for 90 days. This proved to be only a temporary fix, as events in the Middle East and elsewhere revealed other weaknesses in the American economy during the mid-1970s.

The combination of unemployment and rising prices posed an unfamiliar challenge to economists. This phenomenon, known as **stagflation**, indicated that the post-World War II prosperity was over. In the immediate term, it was uncertain whether conventional strategies, like deficit spending, would end the recession. It

appeared that the U.S. economy was entering a period of instability.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Stagflation**

High inflation combined with high unemployment and slow economic growth.



#### SUMMARY

Richard Nixon used a Southern strategy to tap the growing political power of the Sun Belt, while cultivating the support of Northern middle-class and blue-collar voters, to win the White House in 1968. After being elected by the silent majority, however, it became clear that racial equality and identity politics were anything but silent. The busing controversy revealed the limits of forced integration. Identity politics, as practiced by feminists and gay rights activists, indicated the arrival of a new sexual revolution. The 1970s were the end of a period of economic expansion that began in 1945. Inflation, unemployment, and economic stagnation—"stagflation"—impacted Americans throughout the decade.

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#### ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Map of Sun Belt](#) | License: Creative Commons



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