

# The Rise of the New Right

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, dysfunction in the Democratic Party, the anti-war movement, identity politics, and the sexual revolution divided the liberal coalition that created the New Deal and the Great Society. At the same time, a politically and socially conservative faction arose and gained influence in the Republican Party. By the presidential election of 1980, this conservative movement had come to be known as the New Right. It redefined American politics and society.

This tutorial examines the origins of the New Right in four parts:

## 1. The Sun Belt and the Rust Belt

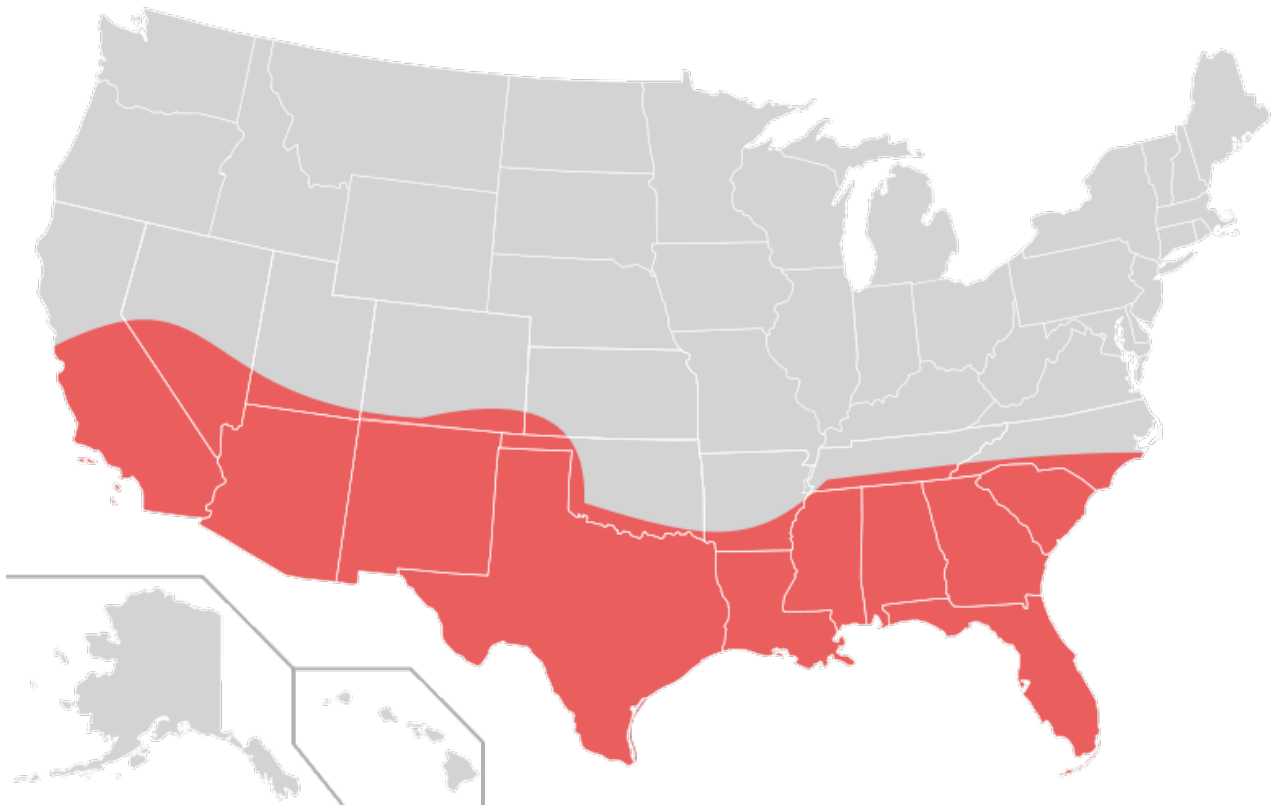
The rise of the New Right was, in part, a result of the economic and political emergence of the **Sun Belt**.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Sun Belt**

Southern and Southwestern region of the United States.



The Sun Belt stretches from California to Texas to Florida.

Throughout the post-World War II era, the Sun Belt gained economic importance as a variety of industries, particularly those related to national defense, relocated there.

In 1961, President Kennedy committed the nation to putting a man on the moon before the end of the decade. The Johnson and Nixon administrations also supported this goal and provided significant funding for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to achieve it. By the time astronauts Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin walked on the moon on July 20, 1969, the U.S. space program had spent \$25 billion. Much of that money was spent on the construction and staffing of facilities in the Sun Belt that oversaw rocket launches, trained astronauts, and managed space flight. The best known of these facilities are the Launch Operations (Kennedy) Center in Florida and the Manned Spacecraft (Johnson) Center in Houston, Texas.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The space program would not have succeeded without the ongoing development of computers. Information technology was another industry that emerged in the Sun Belt, particularly in an area near San Francisco known as “Silicon Valley.” In 1975, Bill Gates and Paul Allen formed Microsoft and, 1 year later, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple.



#### DID YOU KNOW

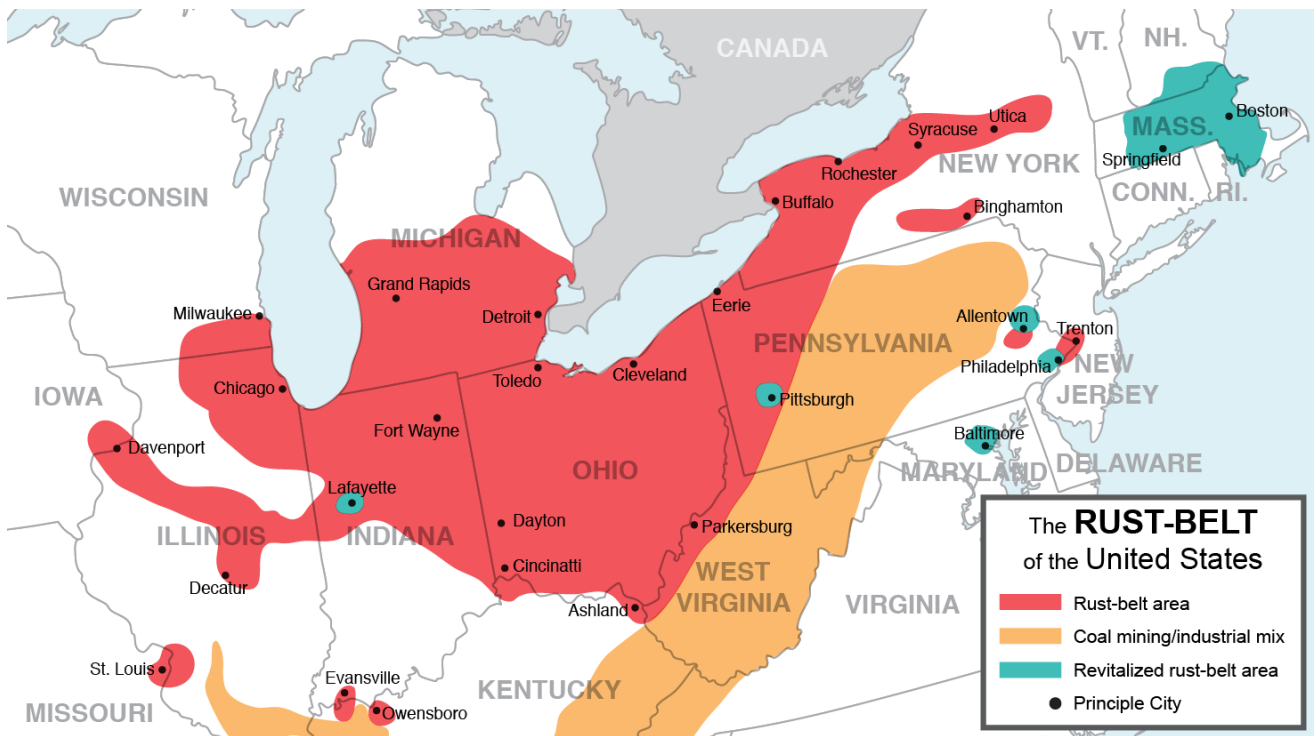
The Apple II personal computer, which was released in 1977, cost \$1,298. Unlike computers a decade earlier, which were often large enough to require an entire room, the Apple II fit on top of a desk. Economic progress and innovation did not advance at the same pace in the Northeastern and Midwestern states. As economic competition with Western Europe and Asia increased—and U.S. trade deficits mounted—during the 1970s, this region became known as the **Rust Belt**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

## Rust Belt

The portion of the Northeastern and Midwestern United States that was characterized by declining industries during the 1970s.



The Rust Belt includes much of the Northeast and Midwest, especially upstate New York, western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan.



An abandoned Packard automotive plant in Detroit, Michigan.

Northern cities, including Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Detroit, were among those hit hardest by international competition and the rise of the Sun Belt.

The relocation of plants to the Sun Belt and competition from Asian companies contributed to the decline of the automobile industry in Detroit (once known as the “Motor City”) and of related local industries. Between 1947 and 1977, the number of manufacturers in Detroit declined from over 3,000 to fewer than 2,000. During the same period, manufacturing jobs decreased from 338,400 to 153,000.

Attempts by local leaders and economists as well as elected officials in Washington, DC to solve the problem of **stagflation** sometimes widened the gap between the Sun and Rust Belts. Economic hardship increased inequality and frustrated many Americans.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Stagflation

High inflation combined with high unemployment and slow economic growth.

When **Jimmy Carter** took office in 1977, the unemployment rate was high (7.5%), inflation was increasing (reaching 11.3% by 1979), and economic growth was slow.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Jimmy Carter

Democratic president from 1977 to 1981 who attempted to reorient U.S. foreign policy toward promoting universal human rights while drawing a hard line against the Soviet Union and threats to American interests in the Middle East.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of American workers employed in manufacturing jobs, an economic sector that was heavily unionized and that had provided middle-class wages and retirement benefits for many workers, decreased from 38% to 28%.



#### BIG IDEA

The rise of the Sun Belt, the decline of the Rust Belt, and persistent stagflation throughout the 1970s had significant implications for the rest of the 20th century. The decline of manufacturing in the Rust Belt—deindustrialization—indicated America’s transition to a “postindustrial” economy in which manufacturing was of less importance. The success of Sun Belt industries, including those related to defense, energy, and tourism, reflected a transition to a service-based economy that rewarded technological innovation and created jobs that were usually not unionized and paid less than manufacturing positions. By 1980, frustration with the recession and the lack of well-paying jobs led many blue-collar workers to support the Republican Party.

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## 2. “Neoconservatives”

Economic transformation, combined with social and political battles over Vietnam and identity politics, contributed to the emergence of a conservative political coalition known as the **New Right**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### New Right

A coalition of American conservatives, including business leaders, Southern Whites, intellectuals, and evangelical Christians, who organized in response to socioeconomic changes during the 1960s and 1970s.

To solve the nation’s economic and foreign policy problems, a group of intellectuals known as “neoconservatives” proposed an alternative to the liberal agenda that had produced the welfare state and international cooperation:

- Neoconservative economists including Milton Friedman called for lower taxes, less government regulation, and significant cuts to social spending to spur investment and shrink the growing budget deficit.
- In a repudiation of Richard Nixon’s *détente* policy and Jimmy Carter’s Middle East diplomacy, neoconservatives sought increased military spending, greater pressure on the Soviet Union (to bring about its collapse), and a stronger American presence in the Middle East.

Neoconservatives formed several organizations and “think tanks” to develop and express their ideas. The Heritage Foundation—launched in 1973, with \$250,000 contributed by Joseph Coors (of Coors Brewing Company)—was one of the most notable organizations among these. In some ways, the Heritage Foundation served as the “intellectual arm” of the New Right. Its members wrote policy position papers and made political recommendations to conservative candidates and officials.

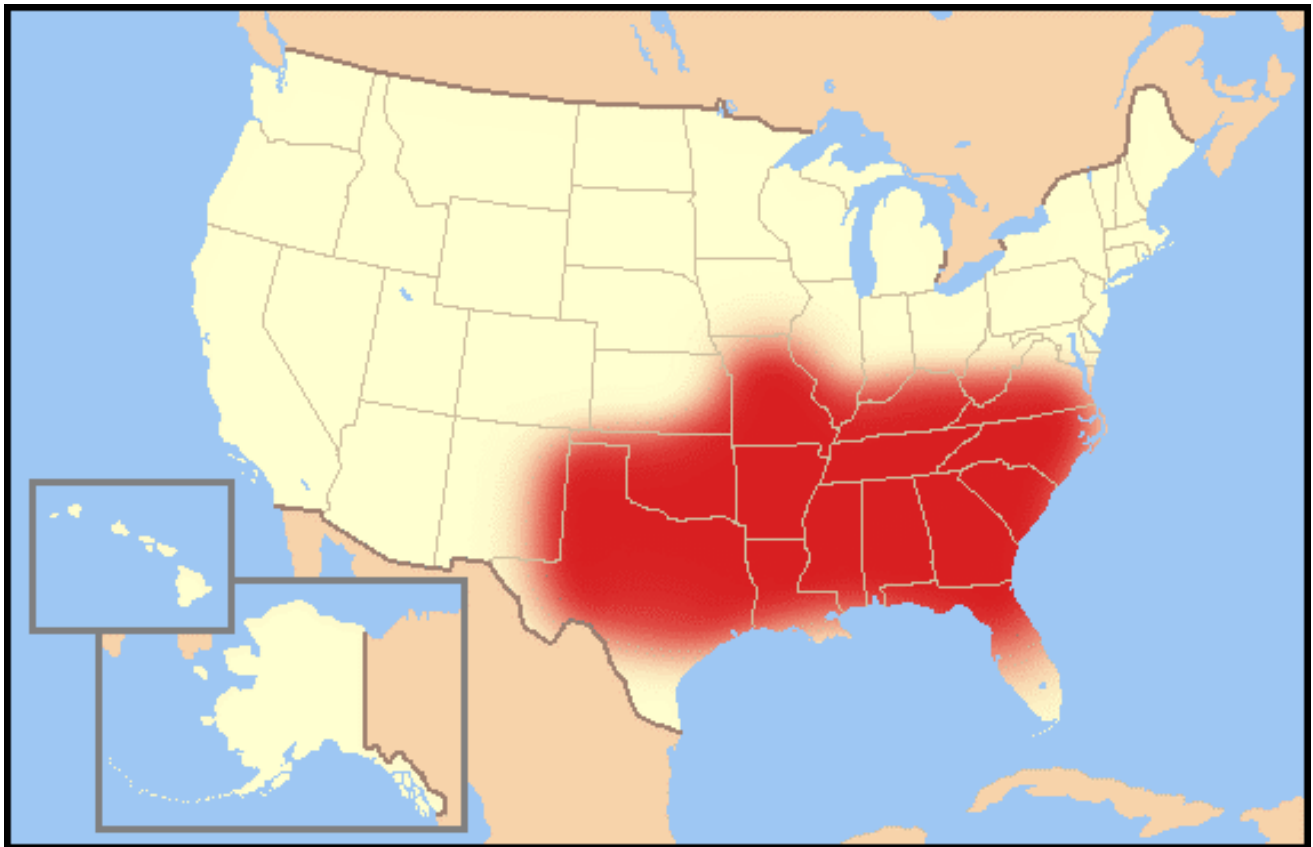
Neoconservatives valued individual freedom above social welfare. They argued that liberal programs (e.g., the food stamp program) led to dependence on government support. They also interpreted the “equal protection” clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and other federal civil rights measures, narrowly.

In March 1972, Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and sent it to the states for ratification. The amendment banned all forms of sexual discrimination and, in doing so, provided a constitutional basis for gender equality. It was supported by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and other civil rights groups. By 1973, 30 states had approved the amendment; ratification seemed certain. However, neoconservatives, with the support of socially conservative grassroots organizations, argued that the amendment threatened “traditional” family values and would end privileges enjoyed by women, including gender-specific restrooms and exemption from military service. As a result of conservative activism, the ERA failed to receive the approval of 38 states—the number required for ratification.

### 3. The “Moral Majority”

A resurgence of Protestant evangelicalism during the 1970s contributed to a crucial component of the New Right. The evangelical movement (also known as the Religious Right) added a concern with social and moral issues to the New Right agenda.

Although membership in mainstream Christian denominations stagnated during the 1970s, evangelical Protestant sects grew significantly, especially in the area sometimes referred to as the “Bible Belt.”



A map showing the Bible Belt of the United States in red. The expansion of Protestant evangelical sects during the 1970s was greatest in this area.



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1980, the Southern Baptist Convention became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.



Evangelical Christians were an important political and social force throughout the 1970s. A total of 1,300 radio stations were owned and operated by evangelicals. Christian television programs, including Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club* and Jim Bakker's *The PTL (Praise the Lord) Club*, were enormously popular and raised millions of dollars in viewer contributions. Large "megachurches" were built, particularly in suburban communities, along with Christian schools and universities.

Evangelical Christians believed that premarital and extramarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, drug use, and other "irreligious" practices were responsible for the decline of traditional family values in the United States. They organized to defend the values that they believed were under siege.

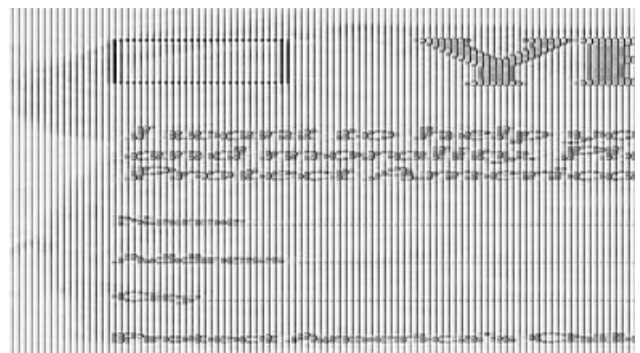
➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1978, Christian singer (and former beauty pageant winner) **Anita Bryant** helped to establish Save Our Children, Inc. to overturn a Miami ordinance that banned discrimination based on sexual orientation. Using fundraising cards like the following one, which asked for help to "bring America back to God and morality," Bryant gained the support of evangelicals and conservatives across the country. The ordinance was repealed.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Anita Bryant

Christian singer and beauty pageant winner who formed the organization Save Our Children in 1978 to fight the gay rights movement in Florida by falsely conflating homosexuality with pedophilia.



Building upon Bryant's movement in Florida, a Virginia minister named **Jerry Falwell** formed the "Moral Majority" in 1979. The Moral Majority, according to Falwell, was "pro-life, pro-family, pro-America." In addition to its religious and moral aspects, the organization had a political focus, indicating the growing influence of the New Right in American politics.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Jerry Falwell

Virginia minister who founded the "Moral Majority" in 1979 to advance a "pro-life, pro-family, pro-America" agenda and who quickly aligned with the Republican Party to advance socially conservative policies in the United States after 1980.

## 4. Ronald Reagan and the Election of 1980

The election of **Ronald Reagan** as president in 1980 was the result of the political, economic, social, and cultural trends that led to the rise of the New Right. Reagan appealed to those who worried about the economy and the decline of American influence abroad. He also attracted the most ardent members of the New Right when he promised to reduce the role of the federal government and support states' rights.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Ronald Reagan

Conservative Republican president from 1981 to 1989 whose support of tax cuts, deregulation, reduced spending on social programs, hard-line anti-communism, and conservative social policies

earned him the loyalty of the “New Right.”

Reagan’s election was the culmination of an unusual transition from movie actor to politician. Born and raised in the Midwest, he moved to California in 1937 to become a Hollywood actor.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Reagan was a reserve officer in the U.S. Army, but when the United States entered World War II, he was excluded from active duty because of his poor eyesight. He spent the war in the army’s First Motion Picture Unit.

After the war, Reagan resumed his film career. He led the Screen Actors Guild (a Hollywood union) for a time and became a spokesman for General Electric. As a young man, he was a liberal Democrat. However, his opposition to communism and the influence of his socially conservative second wife, actress Nancy Davis, changed Reagan’s political views.



In 1961, when Congress began to work on a national health insurance plan for the elderly under Social Security (later adopted as Medicare), Reagan, on behalf of the American Medical Association, denounced the idea as “socialized medicine.”



In 1966, Reagan launched his political career by running (successfully) for governor of California. He blamed his predecessor, liberal Democrat Pat Brown, for the race riots that had occurred in California's cities and for student protests associated with the Free Speech Movement. He also criticized tax increases and the state government, which he denounced as "big government."

After two unsuccessful attempts to win the Republican nomination for president in 1968 and 1976, Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter to win the office in 1980. Carter had failed to resolve the nation's economic woes, and his handling of the ongoing Iran hostage crisis made him appear inept in foreign affairs. When Reagan asked an audience "Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?" during a televised debate with Carter in October 1980, many Americans replied, "No."

Reagan won a resounding victory in the 1980 election, receiving almost 44 million popular votes and defeating Carter in the Electoral College, 489 to 49.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Only 52% of eligible voters cast their ballots in 1980—the lowest turnout for a presidential election since 1948.

The New Right contributed to Reagan's victory. Many evangelical Christians who opposed the legalization of abortion, the feminist movement, and sex education in public schools voted for him in 1980.

However, Reagan's win was also the result of dissatisfaction with Jimmy Carter and widespread frustration with the government. During the 1970s, many White middle- and working-class voters resented the federal and state tax increases implemented to pay for social welfare and benefit programs. By the late 1970s, this resentment was manifested in "tax revolts" in California and other states where mostly White, middle-class citizens campaigned for the enactment of laws that significantly reduced property and state income taxes.

Reagan won the White House by addressing the moral concerns of the Religious Right and by identifying "big government" as the problem, not the solution, to the nation's ills. His message reflected the country's unsettled mood and helped to set the political agenda for the 1980s and beyond.



#### SUMMARY

Ronald Reagan's victory in 1980 was the culmination of a conservative political movement known as the New Right. The New Right criticized increasing federal spending and expanding social welfare programs and proposed ways to reverse the decline of American influence abroad and the deterioration of "traditional values" domestically. Supporters of the New Right believed that, with Reagan's victory, policies that had been implemented by the liberal establishment would be dismantled.

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#### REFERENCES

Debate between President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, October 28, 1980, transcript, Retrieved from the Ronald Reagan Library, [bit.ly/2pR8zid](https://bit.ly/2pR8zid)



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Map of Sun Belt](#) | License: Creative Commons
- [Photograph of Abandoned Packard Automotive Plant, Detroit](#) | License: Creative Commons
- [Map of the Bible Belt](#) | License: Creative Commons



## TERMS TO KNOW

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### **Rust Belt**

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### **Sun Belt**

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