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The Hot and Cold Sunbelts: Comparing State Growth Rates, 1950-2000

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Overview

When it comes to population growth, all Sunbelt states are not equal. Parts of the region (the hot Sunbelt) grew at an explosive rate, while other areas (the cold Sunbelt) lagged behind the nation. This census note looks at differences in state-level rates of change in the Sunbelt from 1950 to 2000. The states are grouped into four tiers depending on their percent change and the number of people added during the period. The data shows that the middle section of the Sunbelt, especially the Mississippi Delta, grew much slower than the east and west coasts and the Southwest. Despite some slow-growing areas, the Sunbelt boomed overall and now contains nearly as many residents than the Northeast and Midwest combined.

Definition and Background

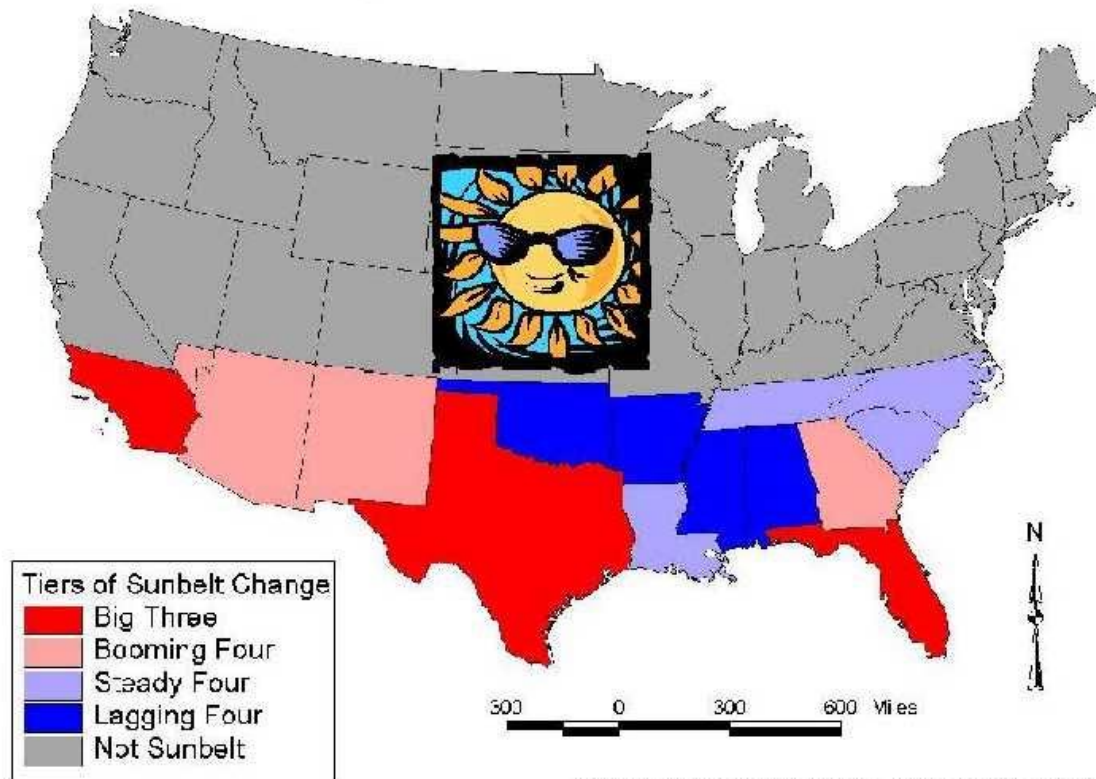
The Sunbelt, as defined in this analysis, refers to the states or parts of states that lie south of the 37th degree latitude. The area runs from North Carolina and Florida in the east, to Southern California in the west (Gottdiener 1994). In this report, the Sunbelt roughly forms the southern third of the Continental United States (see map). In total, the area includes 13 states and parts of two more. Ten counties in Southern California and Clark County Nevada (which includes Las Vegas) are sufficiently far south to be included in this definition of the Sunbelt.

The idea that the Sunbelt comprised a distinct region emerged during the post war years (Mohl 1990). In 1969, Kevin Phillips coined the term “Sunbelt” to refer a group of southern and western states that contained a new constituency for the Republican Party. Kirkpatrick Sale (1976) followed with a book that identified a “Southern Rim” of states that were gaining more political power with each postwar census.

The term Sunbelt also refers to places outside the original Northeastern and Midwestern urban core that grew rapidly from the mid-20th century onward. Urban historian Carl Abbott (1981) defines the Sunbelt as a “pair of regions oriented toward the southeastern and southwestern corners of the United States that have shared similarities of economic development and demographic changes since the 1940s” (page 33).

The Sunbelt’s metropolitan development required modern engineering—from water projects in the Southwest and Florida to air conditioning throughout the region (Fishman 2000). The interstate highway system, which created a grid of equal access throughout the nation, not only linked it to the region’s cities to rest of the nation; it also facilitated growth in the rural Sunbelt.

Sunbelt Population Tiers, 1950 - 2000



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Findings

As the table shows, the Sunbelt can be grouped into four tiers based on population growth. At the top are the “Big Three,” or the hot Sunbelt. These places have each shot up by over 13 million residents over the past 50 years. Florida—which in 1950 contained less than three million people—shot up to nearly 16 million by 2000. Texas and Southern California also made impressive gains, but grew at a slower rate because they started with larger population bases.

The “Booming Four,” which grew just slightly slower than the Big Three, added almost 11.6 million to its population. Clark County Nevada, which includes Las Vegas, shot up a remarkable 2,749 percent in just 50 years. Arizona also boomed, jumping from 750,000 in 1950 to over 5.1 million in 2000. Georgia, which began the period as a mid-sized state, gained the most population in the Booming Four, and by 2000 had increased by over 4.7 million residents to reach 8.2 million.

States in the “Steady Four” gained populations on par with the U.S. growth rate from 1950 to 2000. The Carolinas grew the fastest by slightly outpacing the nation. Louisiana and Tennessee, at 67 and 73 percent growth rates respectively, lagged a bit and pulled the group average to just below the national average. North Carolina, which in 1950 was the third largest Sunbelt state with 4.1 million, almost doubled to 8 million.

Four Tiers of Sunbelt Change, 1950-2000

Region/State	Population		Numerical Change	Percent Change
	1950	2000		
Big Three	(dominate Sunbelt population growth)			
Florida	2,771,305	15,982,378	13,211,073	477
Southern California	5,931,975	20,604,923	14,672,948	247
Texas	7,711,194	20,851,820	13,140,626	170
Total	16,414,474	57,439,121	41,024,647	250
Booming Four	(outpace the national growth rate)			
Arizona	749,587	5,130,632	4,381,045	584
Georgia	3,444,578	8,186,453	4,741,875	138
Nevada (Clark County)	48,289	1,375,765	1,327,476	2,749
New Mexico	681,187	1,819,046	1,137,859	167
Total	4,923,641	16,511,896	11,588,255	235
Steady Four	(pace the national growth rate)			
Louisiana	2,683,516	4,468,976	1,785,460	67
North Carolina	4,061,929	8,049,313	3,987,384	98
South Carolina	2,117,027	4,012,012	1,894,985	90
Tennessee	3,291,718	5,689,283	2,397,565	73
Total	12,154,190	22,219,584	10,065,394	83
Lagging Four	(lag the national growth rate)			
Alabama	3,061,743	4,447,100	1,385,357	45
Arkansas	1,909,511	2,673,400	763,889	40
Mississippi	2,178,914	2,844,658	665,744	31
Oklahoma	2,233,351	3,450,654	1,217,303	55
Total	9,383,519	13,415,812	4,032,293	43
Sunbelt Total	42,875,824	109,586,413	66,710,589	156%
US Total	151,325,798	281,421,906	130,096,108	86%

Notes: California includes the ten counties south of the 36th north latitude. Nevada includes only Clark County, which contains Las Vegas.

Source: Fannie Mae Foundation, Urban and Metropolitan Research Division.
Data compiled from the 2000 Census by Robert E. Lang, Patrick Simmons, and Kristopher M. Rengert.

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The “Lagging Four” group of states, or the cold Sunbelt, grew at half the U.S. growth rate. Mississippi and Arkansas, states that comprised much of the western part of the old South, added the least population and expanded at the slowest rate. Neighboring Alabama registered a slightly faster rate and gained the most population in the group. Oklahoma grew the fastest despite being partly in the Great Plains, a region that has been depopulating for decades (Popper and Popper 1987).

Other findings derived from the table include:

- In 1950, the Steady Four contained about three quarters the population of the Big Three, but fell to just a quarter by 2000.
- In 1950, the Booming Four contained just over half the population of the Lagging Four but surged far ahead by 2000.
- Despite having just 40 percent of the Steady Four’s population in 1950, the Booming Four added over a million and a half more people by 2000.

- The Sunbelt’s share of the national population jumped from 28 percent in 1950 to 40 percent by 2000.
- The Sunbelt accounted for over half of the population added to the United States total during the second half of the 20th century.
- At 110 million, the Sunbelt nearly equals the combined 2000 population of 118 million for the Northeast and Midwest (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Analysis

Given the Sunbelt’s large size and its diverse environment and economy, it is easy to understand how growth could vary across the region. As the data show, the Big Three gained the most people. The three have been the region’s traditional migration magnets. But a “new Sunbelt” of smaller states also boomed (Frey 2000). Some of this growth, especially in the West, was due to a secondary migration within the Sunbelt. Migrants from Southern California helped fuel development in Phoenix and Las Vegas. Some retirees in Florida who moved there from the Northeast have subsequently moved north to the Carolinas.

Sunbelt growth during the past 50 years has been both hot and cold. The desert Southwest has been the hottest, followed by Florida and Southern California. Growth has also been hot in the big metro areas of Texas. But the rest of the interior South’s growth has mostly been cooler. The rural Mississippi Delta, an area that experienced population losses as African Americans migrated north (Lemann 1992), forms the cold growth center of the Sunbelt.

The Sunbelt now contains a disproportionate number of people relative to its share of national land area. In 2000, the Sunbelt accounted for 40 percent of the nation’s population in an area comprising roughly a third of the lower 48 states. Where the nation was once top-heavy from cities in the Northeast and Midwest, it is now bottom-heavy from the booming Sunbelt. That shift, in just a half-century, shows how much the Sunbelt has gained against the once-unchallenged population dominance of the nation’s original urban-industrial core.

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