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The Electoral College Moves to the Sun Belt

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Findings
The recent swings in the political fortunes of presidential candidates representing "red" and "blue" states have pointed up the increased significance of changing demographics for national election outcomes. Using recent Census Bureau population projections and their potential effect on electoral votes, this report finds that:

- **Between 1970 and 2030 the Electoral College has become transformed from near Snow Belt—Sun Belt parity to sheer Sun Belt dominance.** When Richard Nixon was re-elected in 1972, states in the Northeast and Midwest Snow Belt regions held only four less Electoral College electors than those in the South and West Sun Belt: 267 to 271. However it is projected that after the 2030 census reapportionment of Congress, the Sun Belt will have a 146 elector advantage.

- **The states gaining and losing the most Electoral College electors between now and 2030 are among the nation's largest states**. The largest Electoral College gainers are Florida and Texas gaining nine and eight electors respectively. The greatest loser is projected to be New York, whose electoral college representation will be diminished by six. As a result, the most Electoral College rich states: California, Texas and Florida will all be in the Sun Belt.

- **The biggest Sun Belt Electoral College gains, assuming 2004 election results, would be in "purple states," which did not vote decisively Democratic or Republican.** Sun Belt states where Bush or Kerry did not win decisively will gain 14 new electors, compared with gains of 13 for "solid red" and two for "solid blue" Sun Belt states. These 10 "purple" states include Florida, Virginia, Colorado, and Nevada. Most are growing from Hispanic-dominated immigration as well as from large flows of new domestic migrants, whose voting preferences could swing in either direction.

While no political outcome is assured, the ongoing shifts in the nation's population toward Western and Southern states from the Snow Belt will change the Electoral College calculus for both parties in future elections.

Census Bureau statisticians projected astonishing population shifts and remarkable aging when they gazed into their crystal balls recently and divined the projected sizes of all state populations up to the year 2030. Not surprisingly, those changes made plenty of news.

But what do the new projections mean for the nation's tense national politics, and for the long-term strategies both major parties will need to adopt to extend their "red" or "blue" influences across a changing America? Much remains uncertain, of course, but some numbers underscore that big changes lie ahead.

The headline trends are striking. First, the nation's ongoing population shift from its Northeast and Midwest Snow Belt regions to its South and West Sun Belt will continue at a torrid pace (Figure 1). In 25 years, nearly two of every three Americans will live in the Sun Belt. Second, the "U.S. is Getting Old Fast" as USA Today stated on its front page. All parts of the country will begin to age quickly as the huge baby boom generation advances to old age. Still, the most severe aging will occur in the Snow Belt, which will see overall declines in young adults and children. The Sun Belt, in contrast, will see some "younging" along with its aging, as it attracts younger migrants from the Snow Belt along with more youthful foreign immigrants (Figure 2).

And yet, it is worth noticing that these impending population shifts will also profoundly affect national politics, and alter the now-infamous red and blue map. This is because the all-important Electoral College map gets altered after each decennial Census serves up a new national headcount.

What becomes clear, when adjusting the Electoral College in line with the new projections, is that the 60-year period between 1970 and

Figure 1. Snow Belt and Sun Belt Population Growth, 2000–2030

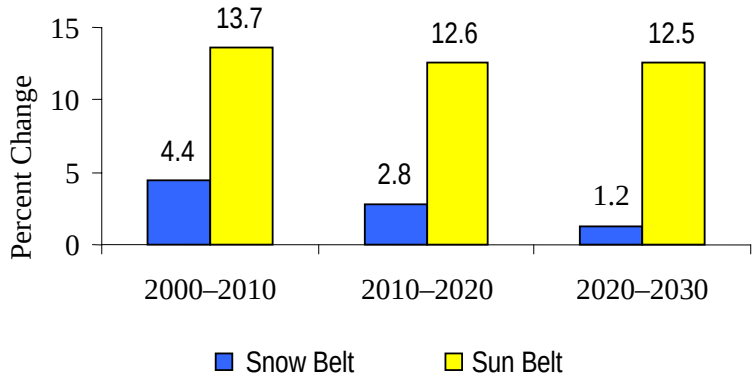
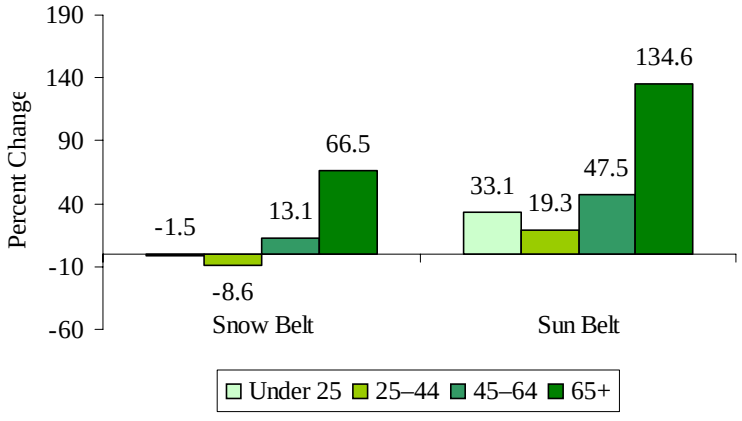
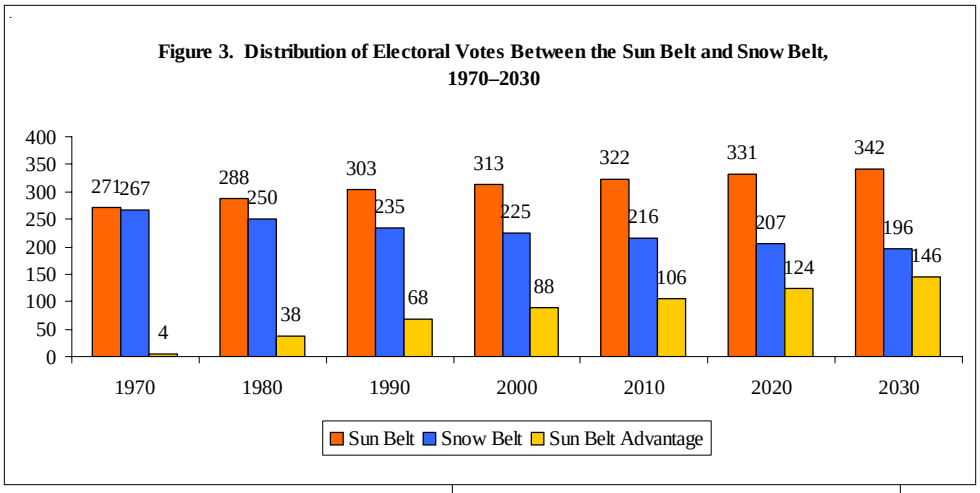
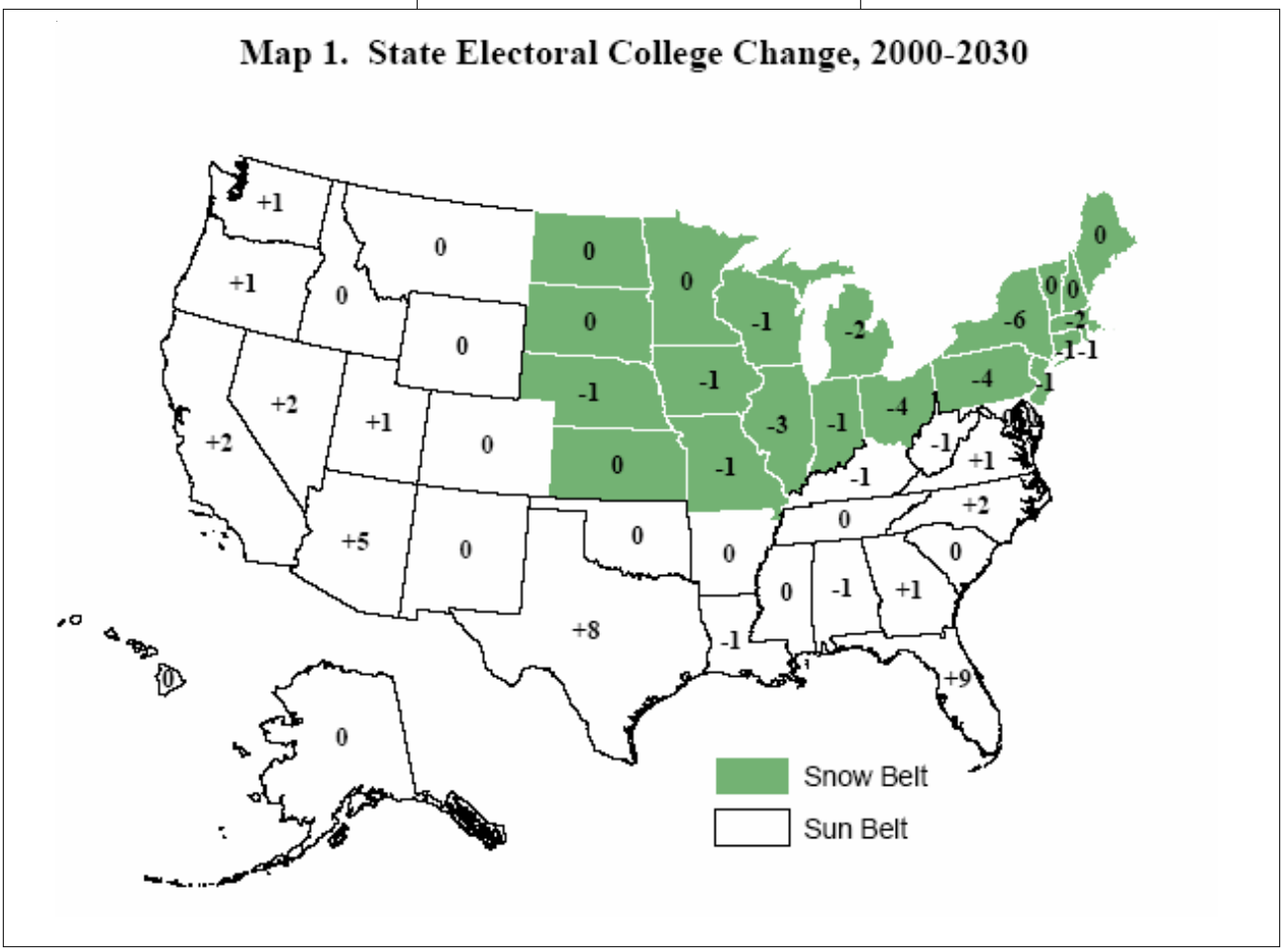


Figure 2. Snow Belt and Sun Belt Shifts by Age, 2000–2030





2030 will constitute a major transformation: from an era of near Snow Belt-Sun Belt parity to one of sheer Sun Belt dominance (Figure 3). When Richard Nixon was elected to his second term in 1972, the collective Sun Belt states held only a four-vote edge in the 538-vote Electoral College. Nixon's advisors showed shrewd demographic foresight when they launched their well-known "Southern Strategy." By the time George W. Bush got re-elected last year, the Sun Belt Electoral College advantage grew to 88. And if the new projections are on target, this advantage will rise to 146 votes after the 2030 Census. The ongoing decline in fortunes for the nation's "establishment" states as they lose clout to what was thought of as the "periphery" is fairly dramatic. Between now and 2030, Texas and Florida will gain another eight and nine new electors, respectively. During the same



period, New York will lose six electors while Pennsylvania and Ohio will each lose another four (Map 1 and Appendix A). Those are significant shifts in a deadlocked nation.

The logical next question is what these trends imply for the future of America's "red-blue" divide. Predicting this dynamic is hazardous at best. It involves speculation about the preferences of future generations and sub-groups in each region, many of whom are not yet of voting age. Generation gaps on issues like "moral values" are known to occur. Just ask any baby boomer. There is also the issue of whether blue state-to-red state migrants will adapt to—or change—the political sensibilities of their new state (Will, for example, a large inflow of Californians to the Intermountain West serve to turn Utah blue?). Throwing these cautions aside, I calculated what would happen if the 2004 state-by-state outcomes were simply carried forward to the 2030 Electoral College. Not surprisingly, in that scenario red states ruled. All else being equal, in 2030 the red-blue Electoral College vote would come to 303 to 235 (compared with 286 to 252 last November). And as Table 1 shows, this change is largely due to Snow Belt to Sun Belt demographic shifts. Such shifts portend the continued declines in electoral power of blue Snow Belt states, and large gains for red Sun Belt states.

Perhaps a more useful prognostication is one that builds on the notion of the "purple states"—those that were not won decisively by either Bush or Kerry (i.e. where the margin was less than 10 percent). After all, we might be willing to wager that Massachusetts and Texas will not change their blue and red stripes for several elections down the road. But we would probably not make that wager for Ohio or Florida. Map 2, then, depicts America's red, blue, and purple states. The 11 purple states in the Snow Belt play a dominant role. They include large industrial heartland states like Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The 10 purple states in the Sun Belt are out-numbered by others in the region, but most are fast-growing, and they encompass Florida—the big prize of all the purples.

The "solid" red and blue states in each part of the county possess demographic profiles which are indelibly linked to each party's base (Table 2). The true blue states in the Snow Belt—New York and most of New England—are coastal, urbanized, racially diverse states that represent the backbone of current Democratic support. The solid red part of the Snow Belt is comprised of mostly white, small community, culturally conservative states: Indiana, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and ("What's the matter with?") Kansas. The red and blue states in the Sun Belt also differ from each

Table 1. 2004 Election Results with Current and Projected Electoral College Vote

	2004	2030	Change
Snow Belt- Red (Bush in 2004)	66	58	-8
Snow Belt- Blue (Kerry in 2004)	159	138	-21
Sun Belt-Red (Bush in 2004)	220	245	+25
Sun Belt-Blue (Kerry in 2004)	93	97	+4
Total Red (Bush in 2004)	286	303	+17
Total Blue (Kerry in 2004)	252	235	-17

Table 2. Demographic Profiles and Change of State Regional-Political Categories, 2000–2004

Demographic Profiles	Snow Belt States			Sun Belt States		
	Red	Blue	Purple	Red	Blue	Purple
Race-Ethnicity and Nativity, 2000 †						
%White*	84.7	69.7	79.1	64.1	48.1	66.5
%Black*	6.3	12.0	10.7	16.4	9.6	10.9
%Asian*	2.1	4.8	2.8	2.1	11.2	4.6
%Hispanic	4.3	12.5	6.2	15.1	29.2	14.9
%Foreign Born	4.1	17.2	7.1	8.3	24.9	12.9
Population: Percent by Metro Size, 2000 ††						
Metro Greater Than 1 million	21.8	74.0	54.0	39.6	78.2	48.2
Metro Between 250K -1 million	25.9	15.2	18.1	21.6	14.7	25.0
Small Metro and Non Metro	52.3	10.9	27.9	38.9	7.2	26.8
Components of Change, 2000–2004 (per 1,000) †††						
International Migration	8.2	24.1	11.8	14.6	30.6	19.8
Net Domestic Migration	-8.8	-29.9	-8.2	10.4	-10.4	27.0
Natural Increase	20.0	18.6	16.0	28.5	33.0	19.7

Source: William H. Frey analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 Decennial Census, 2004 Current Population Survey, and 2004 County estimates

* pertains to Non-Hispanic members of each race

† analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, March 2004 Supplement. Race-ethnic percentages do not sum to 100 due to omission of smaller groups

†† analysis of 2000 Census population counts, classed according to PMSAs, MSAs and NECMAs used in the 2000 Census

††† analysis of U.S. Census Bureau county population estimates, released April 14, 2005

other in predictable ways. The only blue strongholds here, California, Maryland, and DC, are demographic and cultural cousins of the Snow Belt blue states. In contrast, the Sun Belt reds are younger and more growth oriented than their northern counterparts and reflect the future Republican base. Texas anchors these 17 states which include fast-growing suburban and small metropolitan states like Georgia and North Carolina in the Southeast, and Arizona and Utah in the West.

These red and blue strongholds aside, both the current and projected Electoral College tallies make plain that the purple states hold the key to future Democratic or Republican dominance (Table 3). Republicans are now well ahead in the Sun Belt, but Democrats could make strong gains nationally if they captured more of the Sun Belt purples (Victories in Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico would, in fact, have captured the White House for John

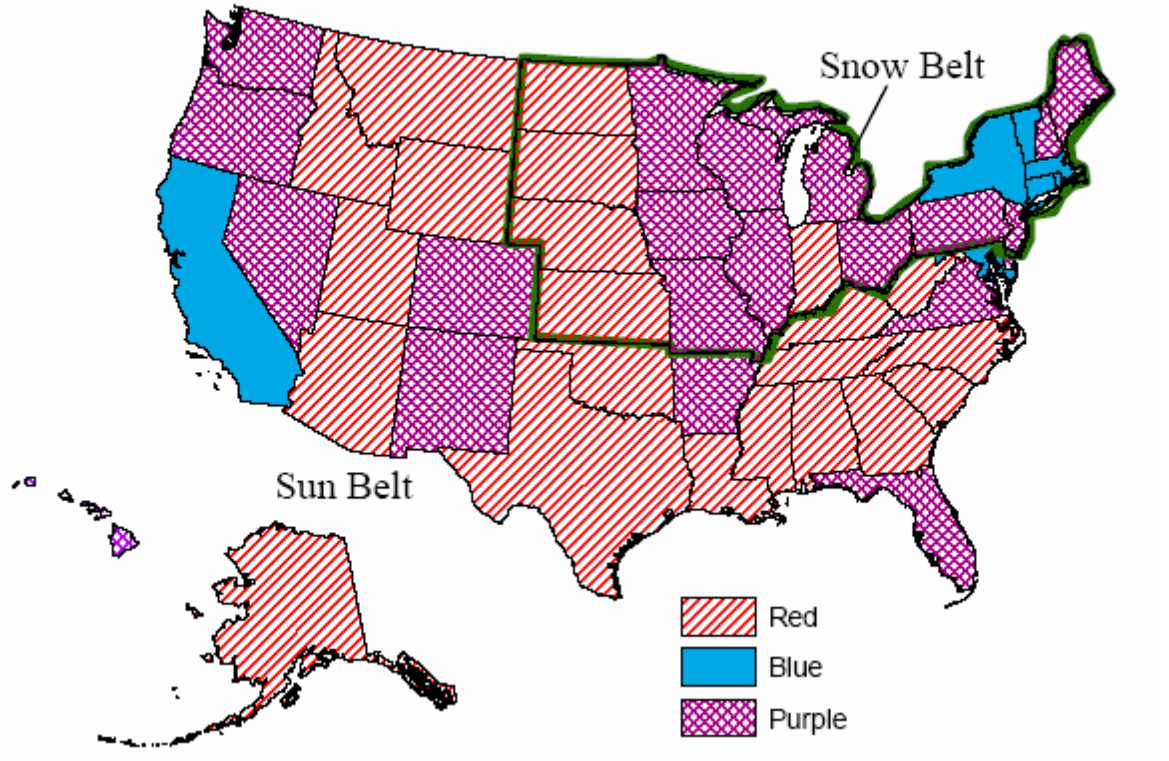
Table 3. Solid Red, Solid Blue, and Purple States in 2004 and Projected for 2030 (Based on 2004 Results)

	2004	2030	Change
Snow Belt-Solid Red	28	26	-2
Snow Belt-Solid Blue	57	47	-10
Snow Belt-Purple	140	123	-17
Sun Belt-Solid Red	155	168	+13
Sun Belt-Solid Blue	68	70	+2
Sun Belt-Purple	90	104	+14
Total Solid-Red	183	194	+11
Total Solid-Blue	125	117	-8
Total Purple	230	227	-3

Kerry last November). Between now and 2030, Sun Belt purple states will gain 14 more electoral votes, more than offsetting the projected decline in blue Snow Belt states. The demographics among these states are also favorable for Democratic takeover. Their near-term population gains will be sparked by the growth of Hispanic-driven immigration and young people—the two demographic groups which favored Kerry in the 2004 election.

By the same token, Republicans cannot be complacent with their showing in the Snow Belt. Between now and 2030, this part of the country will age dramatically, fortifying the clout of constituencies for long-standing Democratic issues related to old age security. The Democrats could make a clean sweep of the Snow Belt purple states without due Republican

Map 2. Red, Blue, and Purple America



diligence. And despite the somewhat pessimistic Census Bureau projections, the purple states in this mature part of the country will still comprise 123 electoral votes 25 years from now. Even then, the distinct regional interests associated with these states' industrial histories, mostly black minorities, and urban-rural divides will loom large in their politics, especially in a slow-growth environment.

While there are inevitably huge unknowns in any quarter century forecast, it is fairly safe to predict that the demographic changes ahead will present significant challenges for each major party. The trickiest dilemmas for both parties will surely stem from the dual personality of purple America. The interests of the rising, growth-oriented purple states of the Sun Belt will continue to clash with the aging, declining Snow Belt purples, perhaps more dramatically then ever before. Yet, Electoral College projections show that each part of purple America will matter greatly for the next several presidential elections, leaving to future political operatives the unenviable task of determining how to appeal to both simultaneously.

Endnote

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Appendix A. Change in Electoral College Electors for States, 2000–2030*

Region-Political Grouping** State	Electoral College Electors 2000	Projected 2010	Projected 2020	Projected 2030	Change 2030 minus 2000
SNOW BELT- RED					
Indiana	11	11	11	10	-1
Kansas	6	6	6	6	0
Nebraska	5	5	4	4	-1
North Dakota	3	3	3	3	0
South Dakota	3	3	3	3	0
SNOW BELT- BLUE					
Connecticut	7	7	7	6	-1
Massachusetts	12	11	11	10	-2
New York	31	29	27	25	-6
Rhode Island	4	4	4	3	-1
Vermont	3	3	3	3	0
SNOW BELT- PURPLE					
Illinois	21	20	19	18	-3
Iowa	7	6	6	6	-1
Maine	4	4	4	4	0
Michigan	17	17	16	15	-2
Minnesota	10	10	10	10	0
Missouri	11	10	10	10	-1
New Hampshire	4	4	4	4	0
New Jersey	15	15	14	14	-1
Ohio	20	18	17	16	-4
Pennsylvania	21	20	18	17	-4
Wisconsin	10	10	10	9	-1
SUN BELT- RED					
Alabama	9	8	8	8	-1
Alaska	3	3	3	3	0
Arizona	10	11	13	15	+5
Georgia	15	16	16	16	+1
Idaho	4	4	4	4	0
Kentucky	8	8	8	7	-1
Louisiana	9	9	8	8	-1
Mississippi	6	6	6	6	0
Montana	3	3	3	3	0
North Carolina	15	15	16	17	+2
Oklahoma	7	7	7	7	0
South Carolina	8	8	8	8	0
Tennessee	11	11	11	11	0
Texas	34	37	39	42	+8
Utah	5	6	6	6	+1
West Virginia	5	5	4	4	-1
Wyoming	3	3	3	3	0
SUN BELT- BLUE					
California	55	56	56	57	+2
District of Columbia	3	3	3	3	0
Maryland	10	10	10	10	0
SUN BELT- PURPLE					
Arkansas	6	6	6	6	0
Colorado	9	9	9	9	0
Delaware	3	3	3	3	0
Florida	27	29	32	36	+9
Hawaii	4	4	4	4	0
Nevada	5	6	6	7	+2
New Mexico	5	5	5	5	0
Oregon	7	7	8	8	+1
Virginia	13	13	14	14	+1
Washington	11	11	12	12	+1

*Source: William H. Frey estimation of Electoral College Electors, based on the Huntington-Hill method of congressional reapportionment, from U.S. Census Bureau State Projections, released April 20, 2005

** Snow Belt includes states in the Northeast and Midwest Regions; Sun Belt includes states in the South and West Regions; Red states are states with a 2004 Bush margin over Kerry (of the combined Bush-Kerry vote) exceeding 10 percent; Blue states were states with a 2004 Kerry margin over Bush exceeding 10 percent; Purple states are states where neither Bush nor Kerry won by more than a 10 percent margin.

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