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“From Boardrooms, to the Senate, to the High Court:  
Phoenix Republicans in and their Impact on National Politics”

In the 1930s, Phoenix Chamber of Commerce members set out to remake their organization, economy, and town through manufacturing, wholesaling, and militarization. An anti-New Deal politics was at the center of this initiative. Over the next forty years, boosters worked within and rebuilt the state’s small Republican Party to transform their local economy and also upend the liberal-regulatory reforms that they considered roadblocks to economic dynamism and postwar prosperity.

Phoenix’s incredible industrial growth propelled the city and its leading businessmen into the national spotlight. By the mid-1950s, the popular press had “discovered” Phoenix. Journalists extolled the city’s virtues, marveled at its development, and spotlighted some of its more colorful boosters and politicians. As Phoenix became a center of manufacturing and commerce, the city elite began to forge political alliances with national corporate leaders, who were also unhappy with liberal economic policies. These out-of-town CEOs were a powerful weapon at Phoenix polling places because they could say with authority that the business climate brought their firms to Phoenix and they would leave if it was not furthered or at least preserved.

These business giants also touted Phoenix policies and programs outside Arizona, which increased the city’s notoriety and also helped put more pressure on other municipalities eager to attract or keep industry. Phoenix became the model. Such recognition catapulted these Arizonans into leading roles in right-wing business groups and political networks. Barry Goldwater is the most well-known spokesman for the Phoenix agenda but his political coattails, even after his disastrous bid for the Presidency in 1964, made sure that even before the California conservatives rode East with Ronald Reagan in 1981, Washington, D. C. was well-marbled with Phoenicians and Southwesterners. With his influence, Goldwater was also able to aide in the nomination of two Phoenicians, William Rehnquist and Sandra Day O’Connor, to the Supreme Court. Both shared his views on the proper role of the state vis-à-vis the economy and made judicial decisions that further aided the rise of an economic governing philosophy antithetical to New Deal liberalism.

Indeed, scholars and journalists have made much of the Democratic Party’s apparent need to balance its presidential tickets with Southerners in the postwar period, which has caused the literature on the Right’s rise to emphasize its southern roots. Yet, scant attention has been paid to the constant presence of a Sunbelt-Westerners on the GOP’s slates. Although only two, Barry Goldwater and John McCain, called Phoenix home, the Southwestern booster-politicians transformed the region and their state Republican parties into potent vehicles for voters, activists, and candidates eager to challenge liberal politicians, regardless of their party affiliation. Hence, Phoenix’s increasing notoriety in the postwar period, and especially in the tumultuous 1970s, offers an important corollary to the newest research on the post-affluence decades and the Southern-half of the Sunbelt. In the recent flowering of literature on the 1970s, economic and political historians have postulated that this decade was pivotal because it seemed to be the

moment when policymakers abandoned Keynesian solutions to economic problems and embraced more enterprise-oriented, supply-side answers. Scholars of the Right have also argued that these years saw the reemergence of the religious Right and the birth of a chronic culture war, which Americans concerned with the racially-tinged idea of restoring “law and order” initially sparked.