The New Right

What follows is taken from Alan Brinkley’s *American History: A Survey*, 10th ed. I added the footnotes.

Questions:
1. How did changing population patterns affect the nation’s political alignment?
2. How did the religious revival of the 1960s and 1970s—and later—move American politics to the right?
3. Why did Ronald Reagan become the leader of conservative forces in the US?
4. California’s Proposition 13 and a more general tax revolt helped conservatives win many new supporters. Why?

THE RISE OF THE NEW AMERICAN RIGHT

Much of the anxiety that pervaded American life in the 1970s was a result of jarring public events that left many men and women shaken and uncertain about their leaders and their government. But much of it was a result, too, of significant changes in the character of America’s economy, society, and culture. Together these changes disillusioned many liberals, perplexed the already weakened left, and provided the right with its most important opportunity in generations to seize a position of authority in American life.

The Sunbelt and Its Politics

The most widely discussed demographic phenomenon of the 1970s was the rise of what became known as the “Sunbelt”—a term coined by the political analyst Kevin Phillips to describe a collection of regions that emerged together in the postwar era to become the most dynamically growing parts of the country. The Sunbelt included the Southeast (particularly Florida), the Southwest (particularly Texas), and above all, California, which became the nation’s most populous state, surpassing New York, in 1964, and continued to grow dramatically in the years that followed. By 1980, the population of the Sunbelt had risen to exceed that of the older industrial regions of the North and the East.

In addition to shifting the nation’s economic focus from one region to another, the rise of the Sunbelt helped produce a change in the political climate. The strong populist traditions in the South and the West were capable of producing progressive and even radical politics; but more often in the late twentieth century, they produced a strong opposition to the growth of government and a resentment of the proliferating regulations and restrictions that the liberal state was producing. Many of those regulations and restrictions—environmental laws, land-use restrictions, even the fifty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit created during the energy crisis to force motorists to conserve fuel—affected the West more than any other region. Both the South and the West, moreover, embraced myths about their own pasts that reinforced the hostility to the liberal government of the mid- and late twentieth century. White southerners equated the federal government’s effort to change racial norms in the region with what they believed was the tyranny of Reconstruction. Westerners embraced an image of their region as a refuge of “rugged individualism” and resisted what they considered efforts by the government to impose new standards of behavior on them. Thus, the same impulses and rhetoric that populists had once used to denounce banks and corporations, the new conservative populists of the postwar era used...
to attack the government—and the liberals, radicals, and minorities whom they believed were driving its growth….

The so-called Sagebrush Rebellion, which emerged in parts of the West in the late 1970s, mobilized conservative opposition to environmental laws and restrictions on development. It also sought to portray the West (which had probably benefited more than any other region from federal investment) as a victim of government control. Its members complained about the very large amounts of land the federal government owned in many western states and demanded that the land be opened for development.

The South as a whole was considerably more conservative than other parts of the nation, and its growth served to increase the power of the right in the 1960s and 1970s. The West was not, on the whole, a more conservative region than others in its political behavior; but the conservatives it produced seemed at times particularly fervent….

Suburbanization also fueled the rise of the right. Not all suburbs bred conservative politics, of course; but the most militantly conservative communities in America—among them Orange County [in California]—were mostly suburbs. Suburbs tended to attract people who wished to flee the problems and the jarring diversity of cities, who preferred stable, homogeneous surroundings. Many suburbs insulated their residents from contact with different groups—through the relative homogeneity of the population, through the transferring of retail and even work space into suburban office parks and shopping malls. The seemingly tranquil life of the suburb reinforced the conservative view that other parts of the nation—cities in particular—were abandoning the values and norms that society required.

Religious Revivalism

In the 1960s, many social critics had predicted the virtual extinction of religious influence in American life. *Time* magazine had reported such assumptions in 1966 with a celebrated cover emblazoned with the question, “Is God Dead?” But religion in America was far from dead. Indeed, in the 1970s the United States experienced the beginning of a major religious revival, perhaps the most powerful since the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. It continued in various forms into the 1990s….¹ The most important impulse of the religious revival was the growth of evangelical Christianity.

**Evangelicalism** is the basis of many forms of Christian faith, but evangelicals have in common a belief in personal conversion (being “born again”) through direct communication with God. Evangelical religion has been the dominant form of Christianity in American throughout much of its history, and a substantial subculture since the late nineteenth century. In its modern form, it became increasingly visible during the early 1950s, when evangelicals such as Billy Graham and Pentecostals such as Oral Roberts began to attract huge national (and international) followings for their energetic revivalism.

For many years, the evangelicals had gone largely unnoticed by much of the media and the secular public, which had dismissed them as a limited, provincial phenomenon. By the early 1980s, it was no longer possible to ignore them. Earlier in the century, many (although never all) evangelicals had been relatively poor rural people, largely isolated from the mainstream of

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¹ Mr. Brinkley was writing in 1999; I think he would agree that the religious revival continued into the 2000s.
American culture. But the great capitalist expansion after World War II had lifted many of these people out of poverty and into the middle class, where they were more visible and more assertive…. One of their number ultimately occupied the White House itself—Jimmy Carter, who during the 1976 campaign had talked proudly of his own “conversion experience” and who continued openly to proclaim his “born-again” Christian faith during his years in office.

For Jimmy Carter and for some others, evangelical Christianity had formed the basis for a commitment to racial and economic justice and to world peace. For many evangelicals, however, the message of the new religion was very different—but no less political. In the 1970s, some Christian evangelicals became active on the political and cultural right. They were alarmed by what they considered the spread of immorality and disorder in American life; and they were concerned about the way a secular and, as they saw it, godless culture was intruding into their communities and families—through popular culture, through the schools, and through government policies. Many evangelical men and women feared the growth of feminism and the threat they believed it posed to the traditional family, and they resented the way in which the government policies advance the goals of the women’s movement. Particularly alarming to them were Supreme Court decisions eliminating all religious observance from schools and, later, the decision [Roe v. Wade] guaranteeing women the right to an abortion.

By the late 1970s, the “Christian right” had become a visible and increasingly powerful political force. Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist minister in Virginia with a substantial television audience, launched a movement he called the Moral Majority, which attacked the rise of “secular humanism”—a term many conservative evangelicals used to describe the rejection of religion in American culture. The Pentecostal minister Pat Robertson began a political movement of his own and, in the 1990s, launched an organization known as the Christian Coalition. The Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and other organizations of similar inclination opposed federal interference in local affairs; denounced abortion, divorce, feminism, and homosexuality; defended unrestricted free enterprise; and supported a strong American posture in the world. Some evangelicals reopened issues that had long seemed closed. For example, many fundamentalist Christians denied the scientific doctrine of evolution and instead urged the teaching in schools of the biblical story of Creation…. Their goal was a new era in which Christian values once again dominated American life.

The Emergence of the New Right

Evangelical Christians were an important part, but only a part, of what became known as the new right—a diverse but powerful movement that enjoyed rapid growth in the 1970s and early 1980s. It had begun to take shape after the 1964 election, in which Barry Goldwater had suffered his shattering defeat. Richard Viguerie, a remarkable conservative activist and organizer, took a list of 12,000 contributors to the Goldwater campaign and used it to develop a formidable conservative communications and fund-raising organization…. Conservative campaigns had for many years been less well funded and organized than those of their rivals. Beginning in the 1970s, largely because of these and other organizational advances, conservatives found themselves almost always better funded and organized than their opponents…. By the late
1970s, there were right-wing think tanks, consulting firms, lobbyists, foundations, and scholarly centers.

Another factor in the revival of right-wing fortunes was the emergence of a credible right-wing leadership in the late 1960s and early 1970s to replace the discredited conservative hero of the 1950s, Barry Goldwater. Chief among this new generation of conservative leaders was Ronald Reagan…. [He was] a moderately successful actor…. In the early 1950s, he became a corporate spokesman for General Electric and won a wide following on the right with his smooth, eloquent speeches in defense of individual freedom and private enterprise.

In 1964, Reagan delivered a memorable television speech on behalf of Goldwater. After Goldwater’s defeat, he worked quickly not only to seize the leadership of the conservative wing of the party but to denounce those Republicans who had repudiated Goldwater. “I don’t think we should turn the high command over to leaders who were traitors during the battle just ended,” Reagan said in 1965, when other Republicans were trying to push anti-Goldwater moderates into positions of leadership in the party. In 1966… he won the first of two terms as governor of California—which gave him a much more visible platform for promoting himself and his ideas.

The presidency of Gerald Ford also played an important role in the rise of the right, by destroying the fragile equilibrium that had enabled the right wing and the moderate wing of the Republican Party to coexist…. Ford proposed an amnesty program for draft resisters, embraced and even extended the hated Nixon-Kissinger policies of détente, presided over the fall of Vietnam, and agreed to cede the Panama Canal to Panama. When Reagan challenged Ford in the 1976 Republican primaries, the president survived, barely, only by… agreeing to a platform largely written by one of Reagan’s principal allies, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina.

The Emergence of the New Right

At least equally important to the success of the new right was a new and potent conservative issue: the tax revolt. It had its public beginnings in 1978, when Howard Jarvis, a conservative activist in California, launched the first successful major citizens’ tax revolt in California with Proposition 13, a referendum question on the state ballot rolling back property tax rates. Similar antitax movements soon began in other states and eventually spread to national politics.

The tax revolt helped the right solve one of its biggest problems. For more than thirty years after the New Deal, Republican conservatives had struggled to halt and even reverse the growth of the federal government. Most of those efforts had ended in futility. Attacking government programs directly, as right-wing politicians from Robert Taft to Barry Goldwater discovered, was not the way to attract majority support. Every federal program had a political constituency. The biggest and most expensive programs—Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and others—had the broadest support. (Goldwater was plagued throughout the 1964 campaign by fears he would dismantle Social Security.)

In Proposition 13 and similar initiatives, members of the right found a better way to discredit government than by attacking specific programs: attacking taxes. By separating the issue of taxes from the issue of what taxes supported, the right found a way to achieve the most controversial elements of its own agenda (eroding the government’s ability to expand and launch new programs) without openly antagonizing the millions of voters who supported specific
programs. Virtually no one liked to pay taxes, and as the economy grew weaker and the relative burden of paying taxes grew heavier, that resentment naturally rose. The right exploited that resentment and, in the process, expanded its constituency far beyond anything it had known before. The 1980 presidential election propelled it to a historic victory.