

Opinion **Data Points**

Britain and America's electoral geographies are broken

The UK and US systems warp our understanding of key social issues among the public

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John Burn-Murdoch YESTERDAY

On June 23 2016, the UK voted to leave the EU by 52 to 48 per cent, two numbers that few on either side of the issue will forget. The outcome was a crushing blow to Remain supporters, but it could have been worse. Had the same votes been cast under the first-past-the-post system, the Leave campaign would have won a landslide, outvoting Remain in more than 400 of the UK's 650 parliamentary constituencies to win by 64 per cent to 36.

Despite the absurdity of a mechanism by which 52 per cent of the vote can translate into 64 per cent of the spoils, Britain remains wedded to this distorting electoral system. According to new analysis by the centre-right think-tank Onward, the effects are felt far beyond elections.

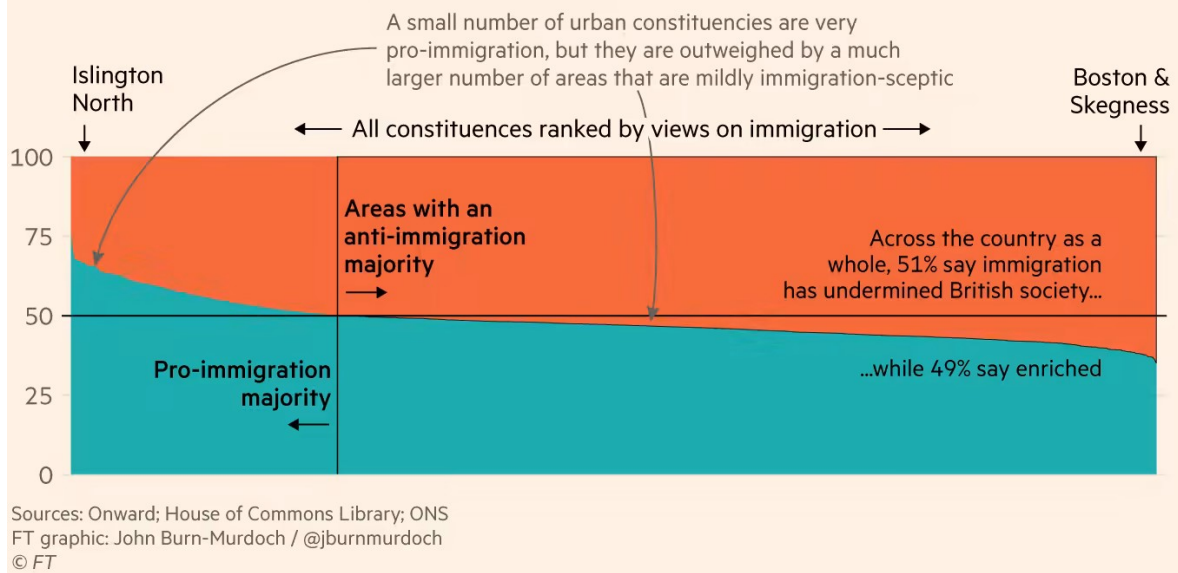
To take one example, [Britons have become more liberal on immigration](#) of late, with half of the adult population now saying immigrants enrich society, up from 35 per cent in 2014. Yet this month Labour's shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves attacked the Conservative home secretary for failing to deport unsuccessful asylum seekers.

Why would Labour stalk the Tories on immigration, you ask? Because Britain's skewed electoral geography, in which progressives are packed into highly inefficient super-majorities in cities while conservatives are spread more evenly, means 75 per cent of constituencies are now majority immigration-sceptic despite the overall electorate splitting almost 50-50. The public has moved forward, but Britain's

...despite the public's views on immigration, but Britain's political incentives drag on progress.

Three-quarters of UK constituencies have anti-immigration majorities, despite Britons overall being evenly split on the issue

Percentage of UK adults in each constituency who believe **immigration has undermined society**, vs share who **think it has enriched British society**

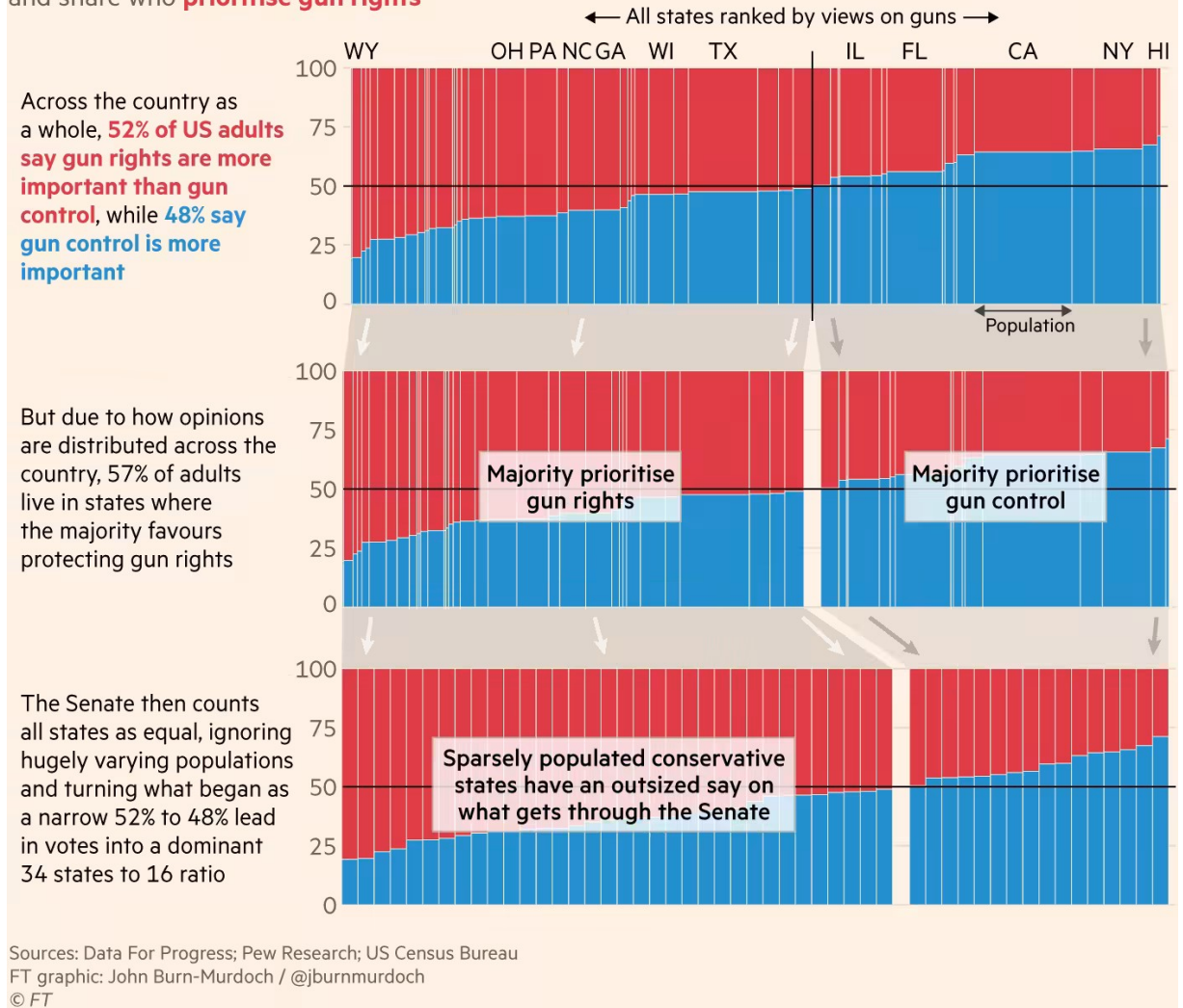


At the UK's 2019 general election, 22mn votes were cast either for candidates who were not elected, or for those who had already won easily. Only 30 per cent of votes were decisive in the outcome. First past the post can be a capricious mistress, and Britain's rightwing has also been on the receiving end of some raw deals in recent years. This merely underlines the urgent need for reform. A democracy in which most votes have no impact and most voices make no sound is not a true democracy. Across the Atlantic, things are arguably even worse, with political inequality baked into the rules. In next month's US midterms, California's 22mn registered voters and North Dakota's 600,000 will elect equally powerful senators. This makes each Californian vote worth 37 times less than a North Dakotan one.

The Senate's longstanding tilt towards more rural, sparsely populated, conservative states continues to worsen. In 2020 it resulted in Black Americans' votes being worth 30 per cent less than white votes, and Hispanic votes worth 60 per cent less. Just as with the UK, this puts a thumb on the scale for major social issues. Take gun control, where the American public is deadlocked on whether controlling access to firearms is more important than protecting gun rights. The Senate's generous weighting to conservatives turns a tie in aggregate public opinion into a 34-16 ratio of states in favour of protecting gun rights.

How an even split among Americans on gun control becomes a comfortable Senate majority for the gun rights movement

Percentage of US adults in each state who believe **gun control is more important** than gun rights, and share who **prioritise gun rights**



Britain and America like to see themselves as the standard bearers of liberal democracy, but on the evidence presented, there is still some way to go.

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