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Geography matters in public spending: local, national, international

Danny Dorling, the 1971 Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford, examines how geography shapes patterns of public spending and political choice from the local level in England to international comparisons across Europe and the United States. Drawing on evidence from infant mortality, voting behaviour and regional inequality, he argues that where people live increasingly determines both the quality of public services they receive and the kind of society they collectively choose to create.

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although few seem to quite be sure about what our own looks like these days. Immigration looms large as an issue; usually those discussing it are highly uninformed, and of course the cost of living is punitive for many – this is obvious anywhere that is not affluent (which is most places).

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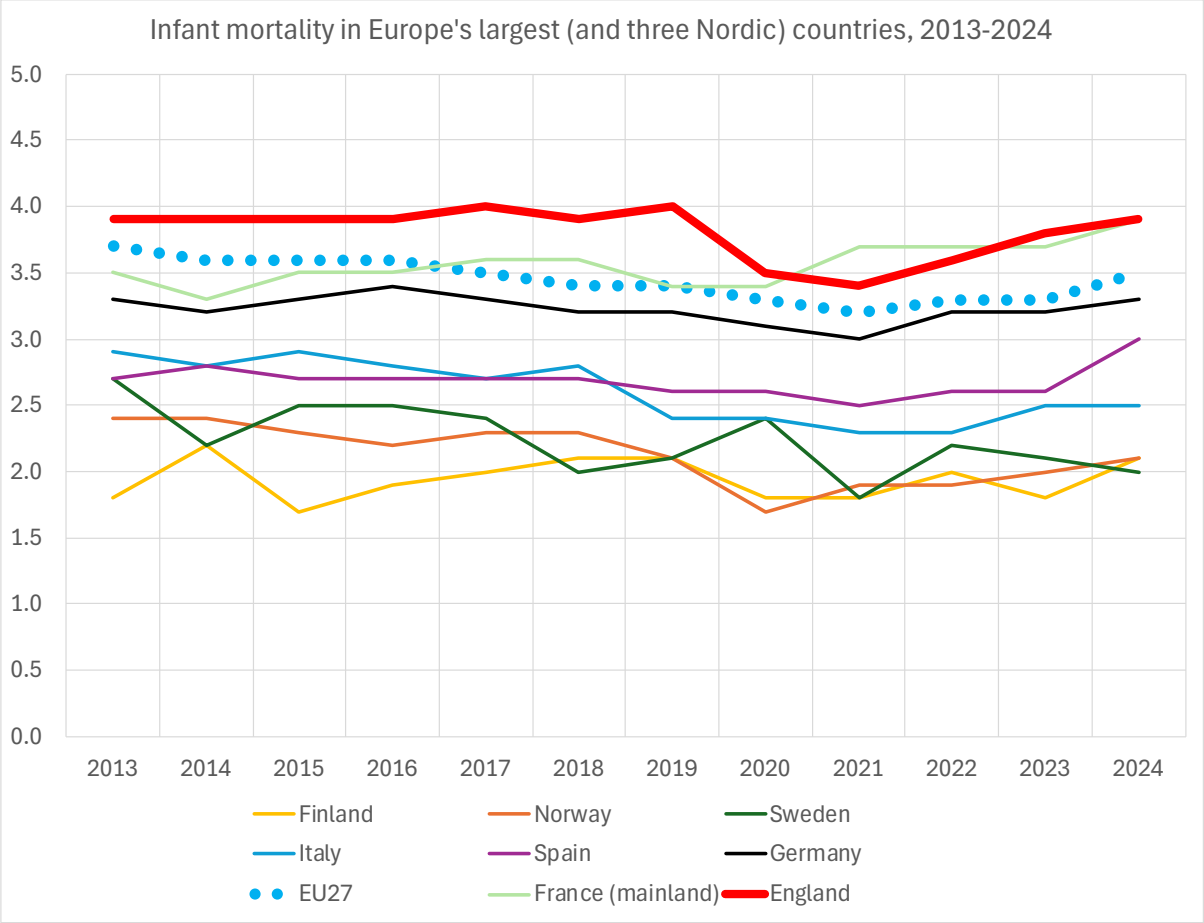
The most basic measure of a better life is whether you get to live at all. The simplest of all international statistics is the infant mortality rate. This is the proportion of babies that die in their first year of life, most in the first few days, expressed per thousand born. In affluent countries, infant mortality now thankfully tends to be very low, but as a measure it hardly improves at all anymore, and yet it differs greatly between places. Infant mortality serves as an indicator, not just of a rate of sorrow, but of what might still be possible. Although, primarily, it is not simply public spending on health that achieves the better outcomes, but a society that sees more of its people as people, as mattering.



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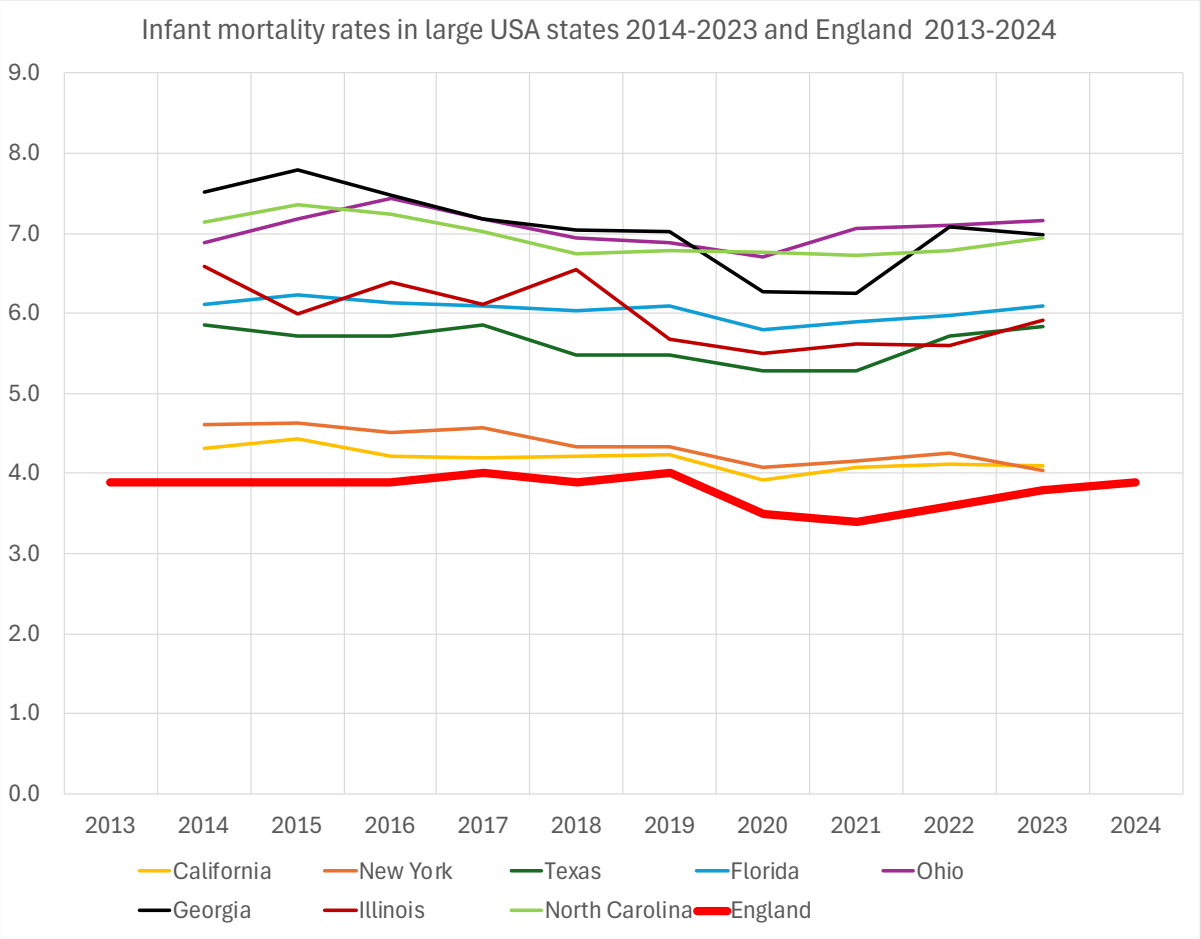

Medical and scientific progress, economic growth, or trends in health behaviour over time, all no longer have a great influence on the trends in infant mortality between states in Europe or within the USA. Instead, it is the structure of each society that matters the most now. Public spending is a part of that. However, countries that spend more on public services, including on health, and which provide more equitable services, also are almost always more cohesive. People are less likely to slip through the cracks. Babies are less often born in circumstances where their most basic chances of survival are poorer. In terms of a newborn infant's chances of survival, England is now more similar to California and New York than it is to the rest of Western Europe. Thankfully, English society is not yet as divided a society as society is within the states of Ohio, Georgia and North Carolina.

If people in the USA wish to have more stable, less divided and more cohesive societies, they would need to become more like their apparently poorer, but socially

far better-off European counterparts. There appears little appetite for this as I write, although voters in California and New York are usually among the most opposed to the Trump government. Unfortunately, many people in English are now toying politically with becoming more like some parts of the United States. This is why voting matters, from the most basic of local election tactics and agendas, through to regional and national contests. Voting is not just about public spending. It is also about what kind of a society you want: less or more individualistic; less or more nationalist.

It is possible to change, but sudden changes are rare. However, we should be bolstered when they happen and not succumb to nihilism. The ‘EU27’ dotted line in the first graph accompanying this piece is so high because several countries in Eastern Europe still have higher mortality rates than England. Nevertheless, across most of Eastern Europe infant mortality has been falling. In Hungary (not shown in the graph) the infant mortality rate fell from 5.0 per 1000 in 2013, to become lower than England’s by 2017, and in every year thereafter. This was not because the Hungarian government was making wonderful investments in their health services, but because far fewer poorer people in Hungary were having children than before, in a country in which there was increasingly little hope of a better society due to the authoritarian government.

In April 2026 Hungarian society changed. Some four out of every five adults who could vote, voted in the general election. They decisively ousted Orbán’s government. To do so, most voted for a party they would not normally support. Collectively, Hungarians chose to try to become more like mainstream Europe: less nationalistic, less individualistic, less afraid. Donald Trump and JD Vance had both publicly supported Viktor Orbán. Orbán’s government had publicly and financially supported the rise in the far-right in several European countries, including in England. The choice now is between what kind of society you want to live in. Geography reveals the alternatives, voting reveals the current preferences, the hopes and the fears.

Sources:

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USA: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/state-stats/deaths/infant-mortality.html

[note – in the online published version of this article the keys to graphs were cropped, but they are complete above.]

PROF DANNY DORLING

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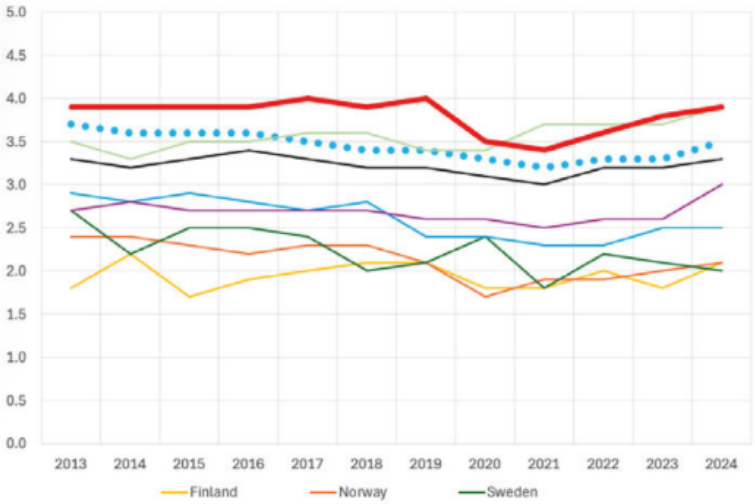

Figure 1: *Infant mortality in Europe's largest (and three Nordic) countries 2013-2024*

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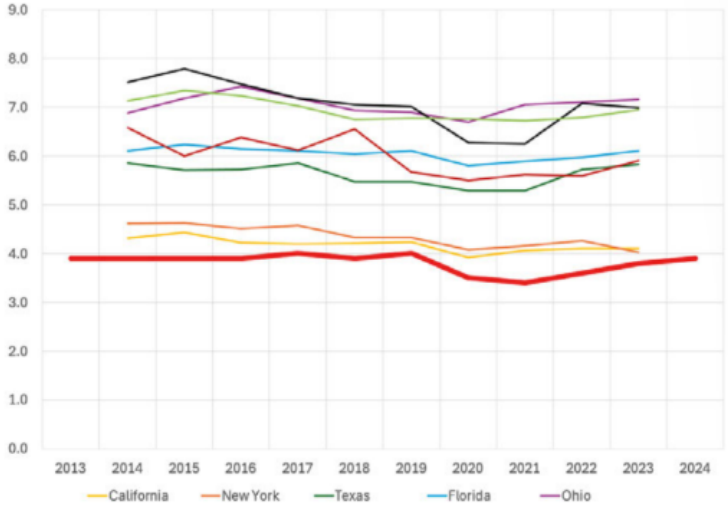

Figure 2: *Infant mortality rates in large USA states 2014-2023 and England 2013-2024*

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