

Adjusting for the calendar is *not* cooking the books

One mechanism of official statistics — why nearly every headline economic number is seasonally adjusted, and why that adjustment is arithmetic, not spin.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the official statistics the government publishes — jobs, prices, crime, output, deaths — the numbers themselves and the way they are read, examined the same way regardless of which party the figure happens to help or hurt. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with agency methodology, official records, and nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS — OFFICIAL DATA REPORTING

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Seasonal Adjustment Mistaken for Manipulation

Tempus, Non Fraus

Governing precedent / case BLS/Census X-13ARIMA-SEATS methodology Status Recurring every January and July

OBSERVED SPECIMENMONTHLY JOBS AND RETAIL-SALES RELEASES

*Every January, hundreds of thousands of retail and delivery workers hired for the holidays are let go. Every summer, students flood the labor market. These swings happen on schedule **every year**, so agencies remove them to reveal the underlying trend — the difference between December and January that is not just the holidays ending. When a seasonally adjusted figure differs from the raw count, it is routinely described as the government “changing the numbers,” when it is the same standard adjustment applied every month for decades.*

THE HOOKTHE MECHANISM

The adjusted number and the raw (‘not seasonally adjusted’) number differ, and the gap is read as evidence someone tampered.

Seasonal adjustment uses a published statistical model (X-13ARIMA-SEATS) to strip out regular calendar effects so month-to-month changes are comparable. Both series are released; neither is hidden.

Field mark: when a raw and an adjusted figure disagree, check whether the ‘discrepancy’ is just the season being removed — the not-seasonally-adjusted series is published right alongside it.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

AGENCY METHODOLOGY · CENSUS BUREAU

U.S. Census Bureau, *X-13ARIMA-SEATS Seasonal Adjustment Program*.

<https://www.census.gov/data/software/x13as.html>

The open-source model the BLS and Census use to seasonally adjust official series.

AGENCY METHODOLOGY · BLS

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Handbook of Methods* — “Seasonal Adjustment.”

<https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/>

BLS's own documentation of how and why series are seasonally adjusted, with both adjusted and unadjusted data published.

Reading an Adjusted Number: A Gut Check

four questions before ‘they changed the numbers’ changes what you think happened to the economy

1 Ask which series it is

‘Seasonally adjusted’ and ‘not seasonally adjusted’ are both official — headlines usually mean the adjusted one.

2 Look for the raw number

Agencies publish the unadjusted series in the same release; the ‘hidden’ number is one table away.

3 Check if the method changed

The adjustment model is public and stable; a differing figure almost never means the method was altered.

4 Remember it cuts both ways

Adjustment can make a month look better or worse than the raw count — it is neutral to who is in office.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 1 of the Official Data Reporting section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins Elections and Federal Laws within Civics, with local government and institutional communications planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.