

Change the starting point, change the story

One mechanism of official statistics — how choosing month-over-month, year-over-year, or a cherry-picked base flips the same series between good and bad news.

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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Base-Period Switching

Unde Metiris?

Governing precedent / case Index and rate base periods **Status** Recurring in any trend claim

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

PRICES, JOBS, MARKETS, EMISSIONS

*The same series can be measured from last month, last year, a pre-pandemic peak, or a recession trough — and each base tells a different story. A figure “up 40% since 2020” may be flat since 2019; “down from the peak” may still be “up from the start of the term.” Agencies report standard comparisons (**month-over-month** and **year-over-year**) precisely so the base is consistent; an argument that picks its own start date is choosing the answer before showing the data.*

THE HOOK

A percentage change is stated without its starting point, so the base can be chosen to flatter or alarm.

THE MECHANISM

Every rate of change is relative to a base period. Standardized comparisons (MoM, YoY, indexed to a fixed base year) keep the reference fixed; a movable base manufactures the trend.

Field mark: when you see a percentage change, ask ‘since when?’ — the same number can be a rise or a fall depending on the base, and a chosen start date is an argument, not a measurement.

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 · BLS

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Understanding the CPI: index base periods and percent-change calculations.”

<https://www.bls.gov/cpi/factsheets/>

BLS explains index base periods and how percent changes depend on the reference period chosen.

REFERENCE · CENSUS BUREAU

U.S. Census Bureau, “Statistics in Schools” guidance on comparing rates over time.

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sis.html>

Nonpartisan explainer material on base-period and comparison choices.

Reading a Percent Change: A Gut Check

four questions before 'up 40 percent' tells you which way things are going

- 1 Ask 'since when?'**
Every percent change hides a starting point; make it explicit.
 - 2 Prefer standard windows**
Month-over-month and year-over-year keep the base honest.
 - 3 Watch cherry-picked bases**
A start at a trough or a peak is chosen to shape the result.
 - 4 Recompute from a fair base**
Re-anchor to a neutral date and see if the story survives.
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INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 7 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.
