

# Time

## Session 13

PMAP 8551/4551: Data Visualization with R  
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies  
Fall 2025

# Plan for today

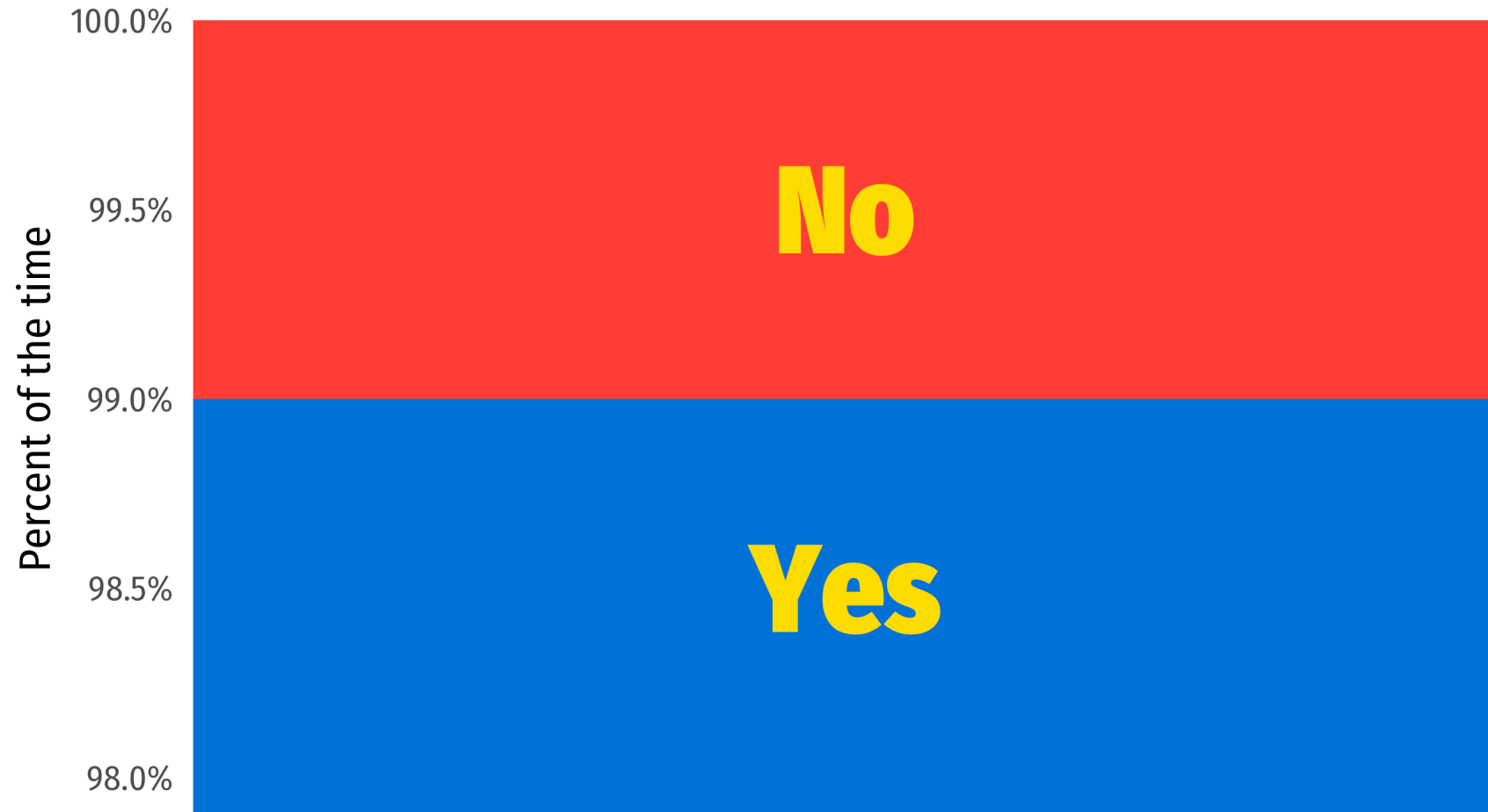
**Axis issues**

**Visualizing time**

**Starting, ending,  
and decomposing time**

# Axis issues

# Is truncating the y-axis misleading?



# Don't be too extreme!

**It is actually more legal to truncate the y-axis than you might think!**

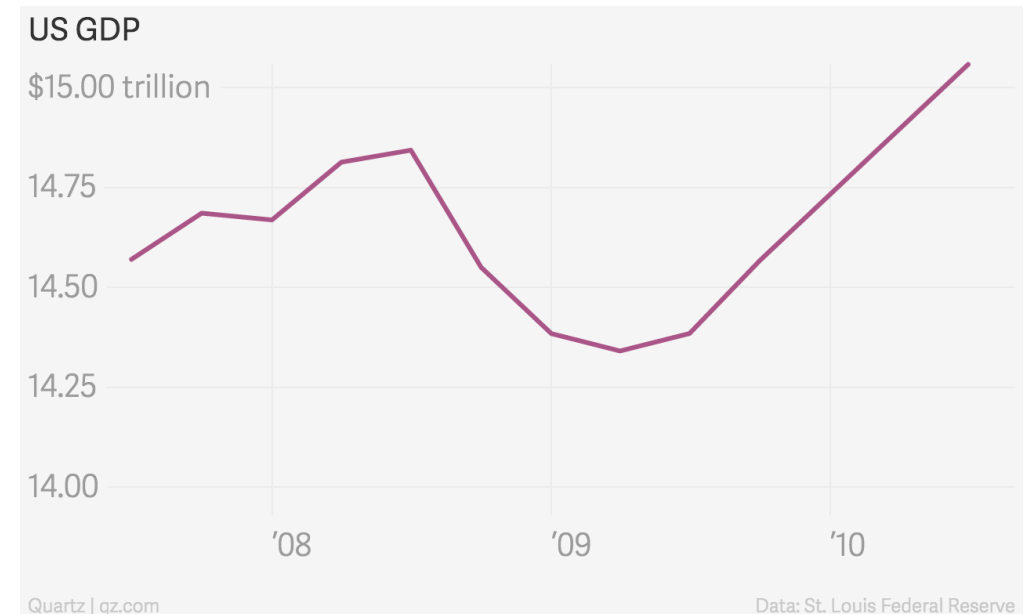
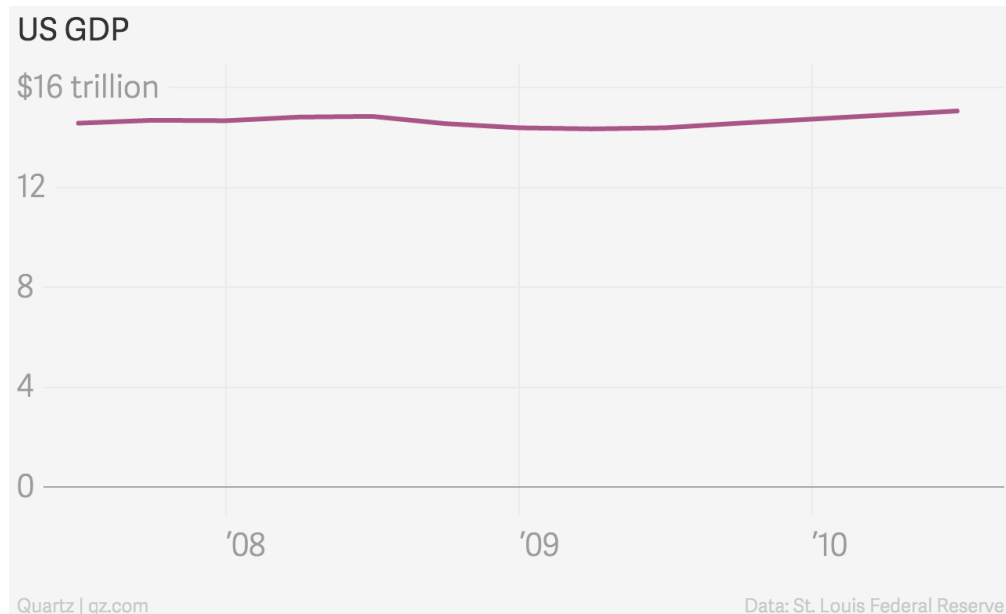
**When small movements matter**

**When the scale itself is distorted**

**When zero values are impossible**

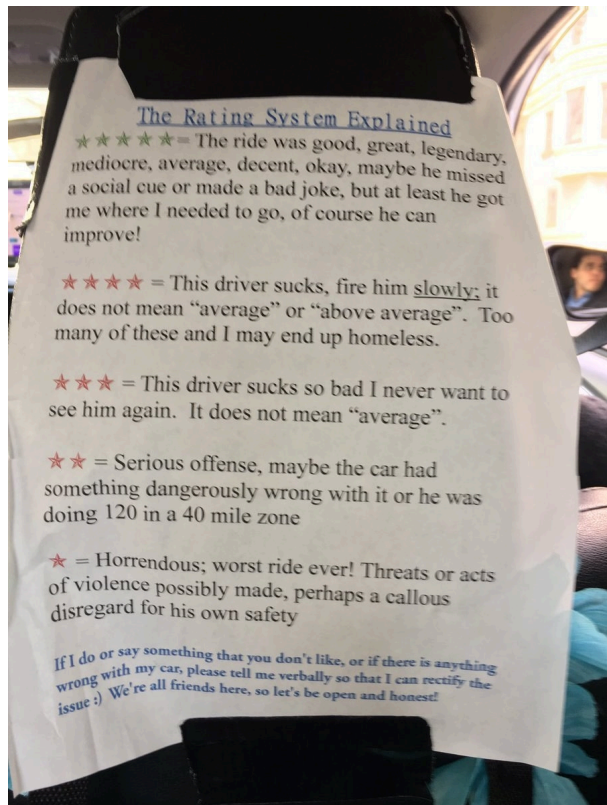
# When is it okay to truncate?

When small movements matter



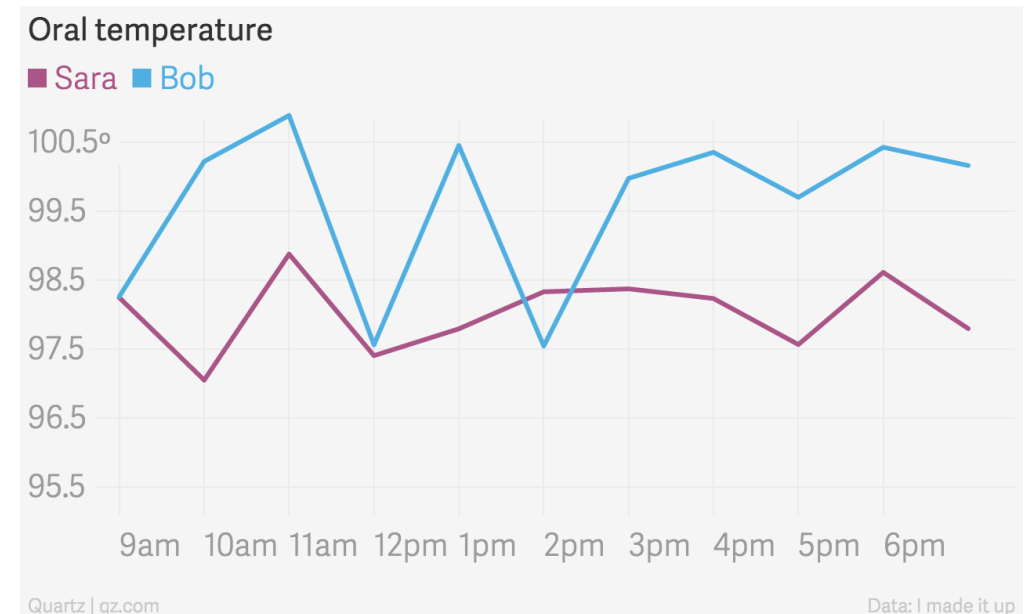
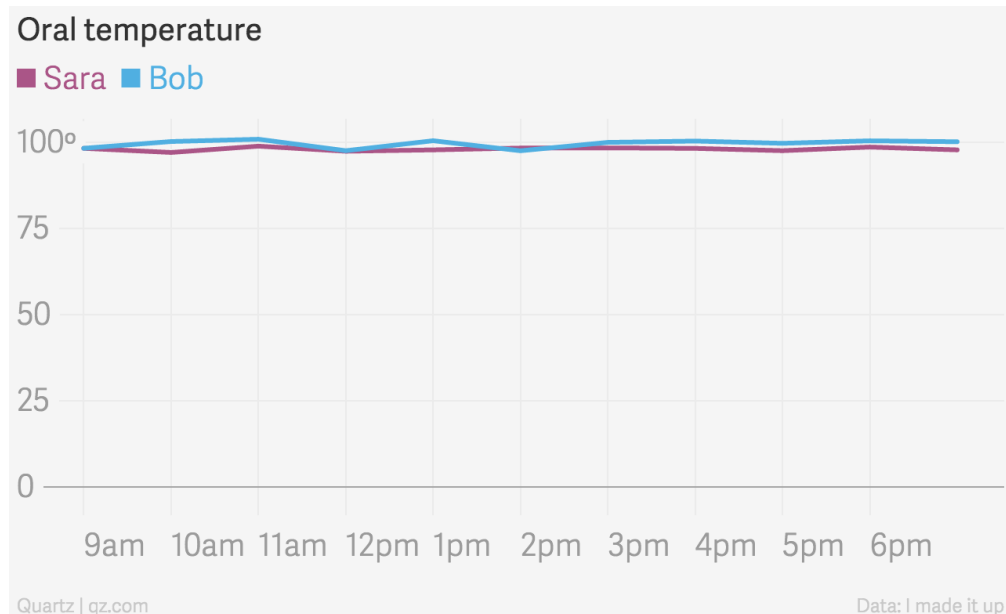
# When is it okay to truncate?

When the scale itself is distorted



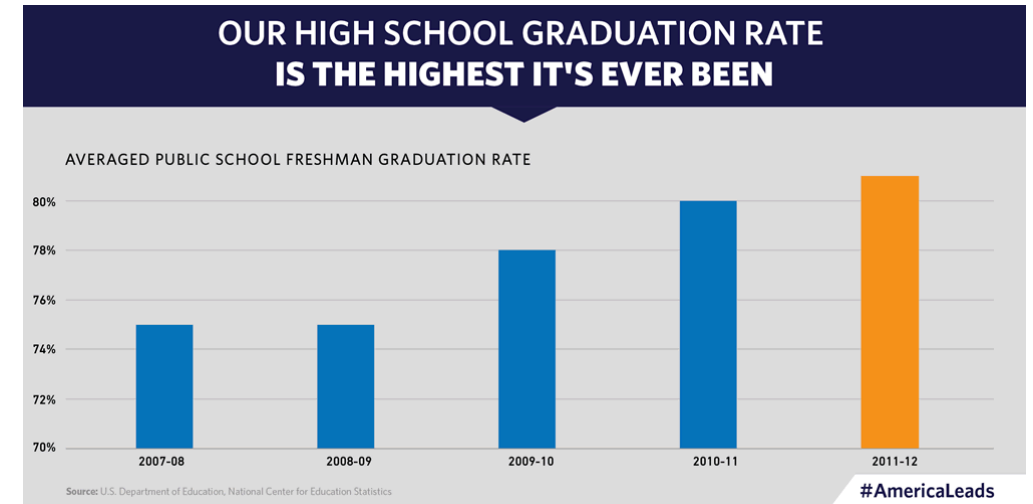
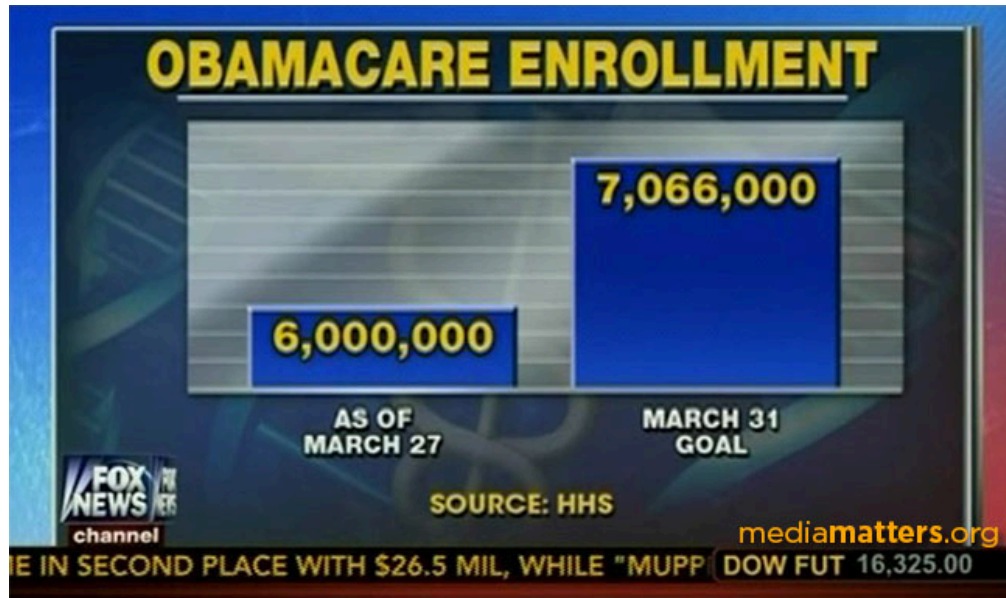
# When is it okay to truncate?

When zero values are impossible





# Never on bar charts

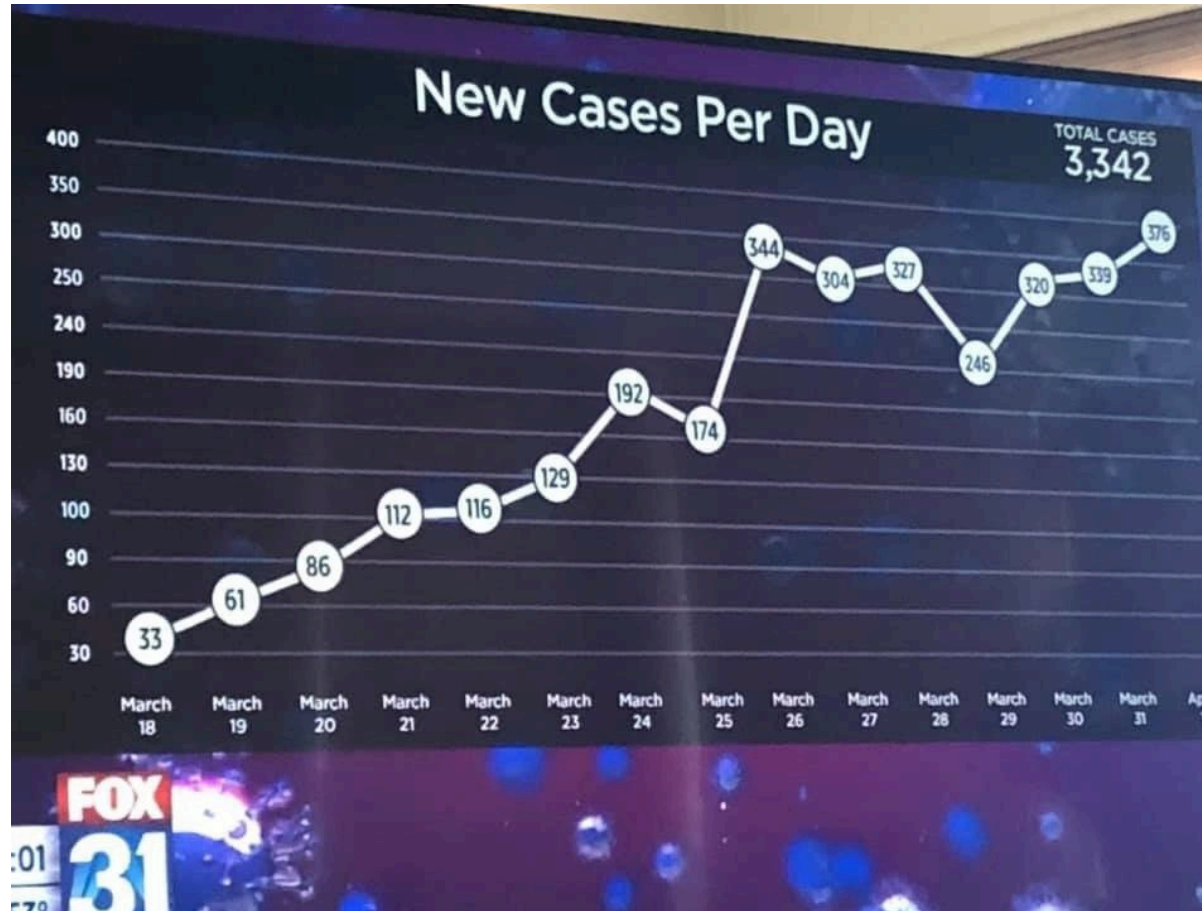


# Zero is okay too!

Just because you don't *have to* start at 0  
doesn't mean you should *never* start at 0

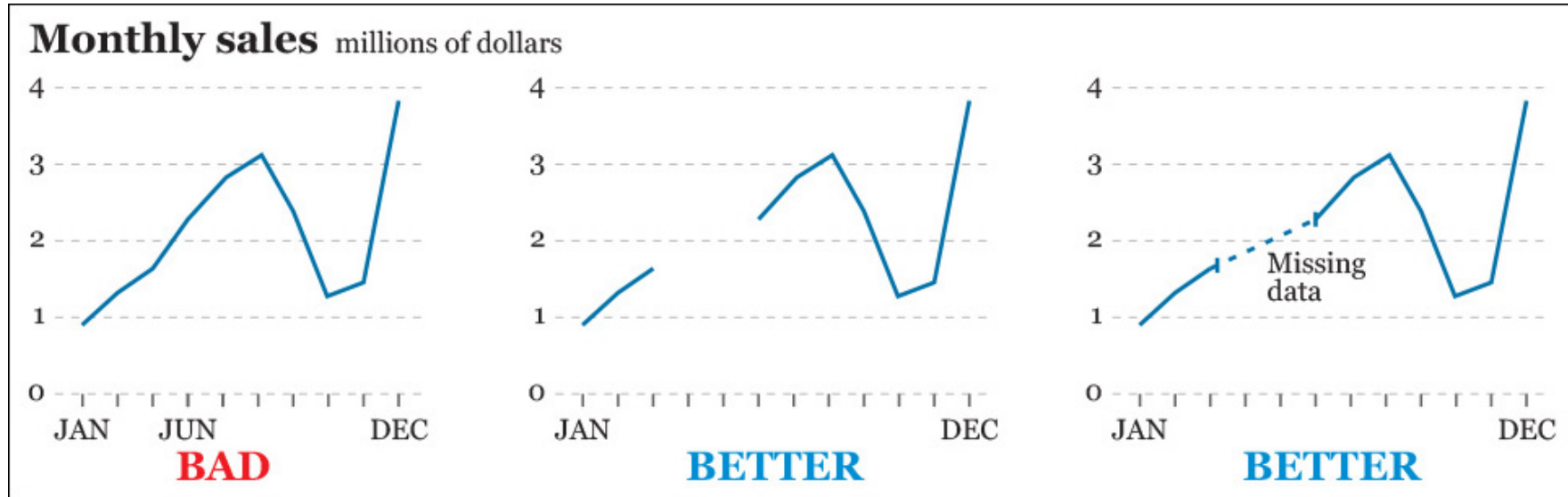
It's often a good idea!

# Keep axis scales consistent



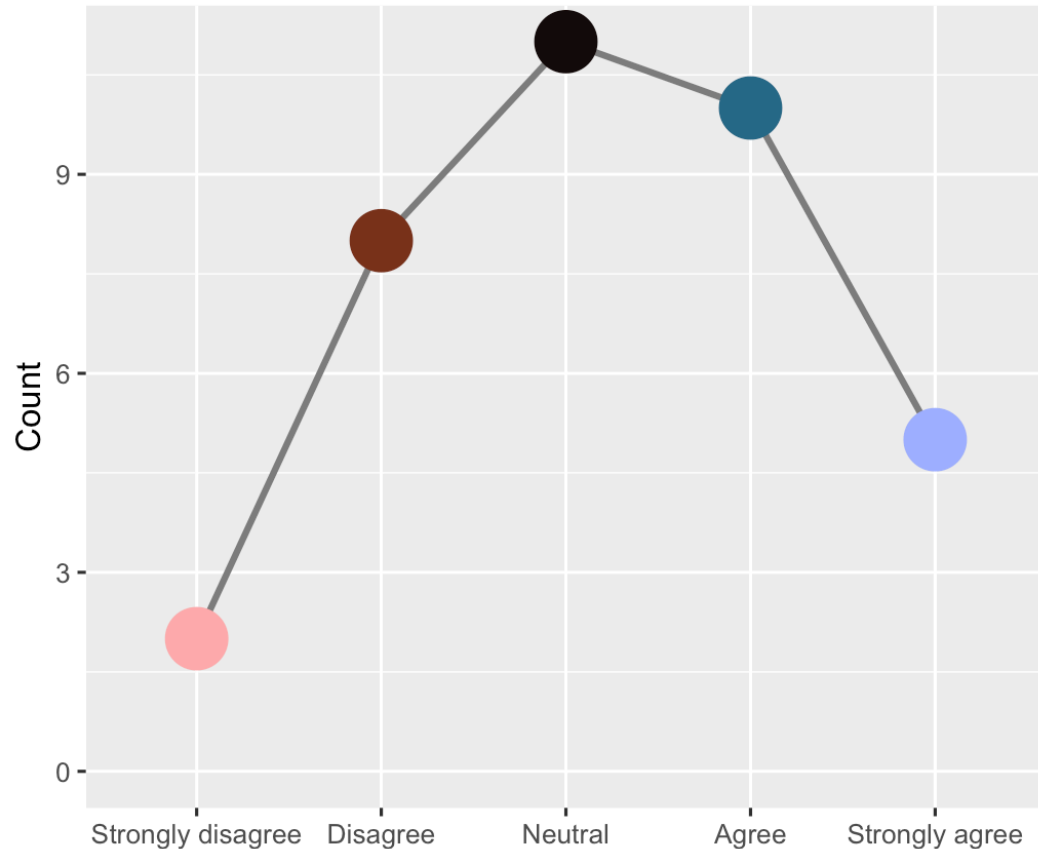
FOX affiliate in Colorado reporting on COVID-19 cases

# Keep axis scales consistent

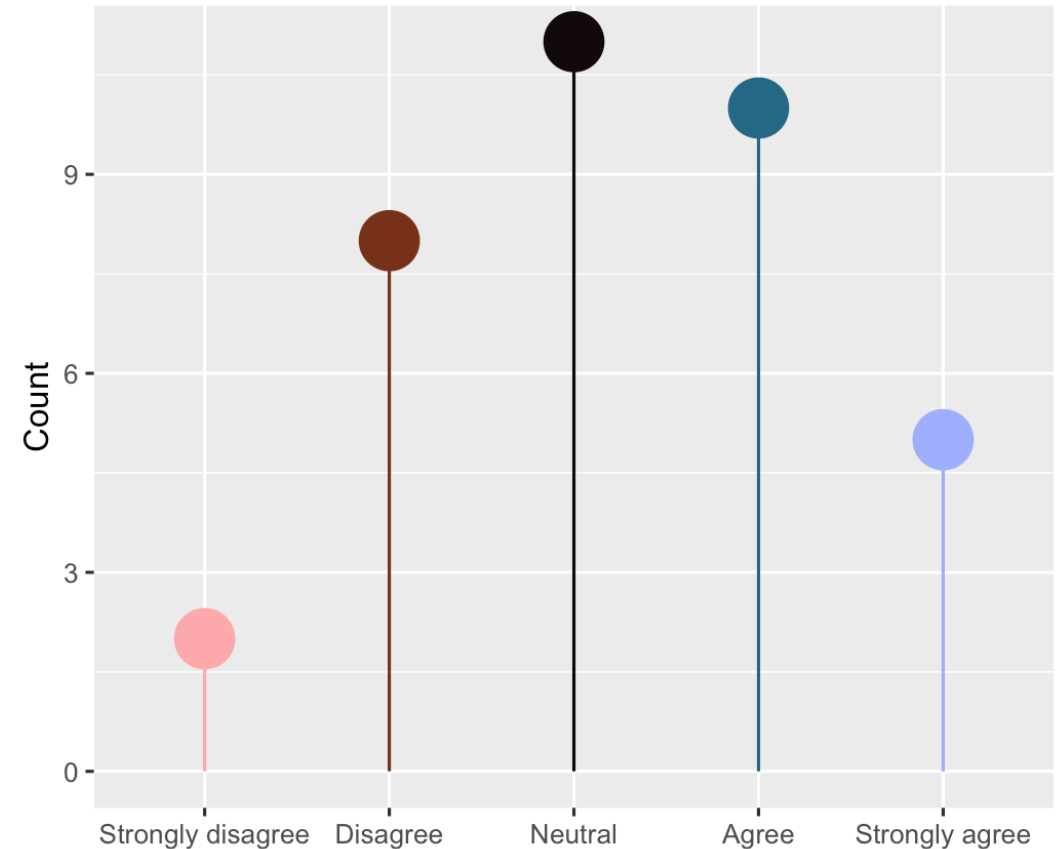


# Don't impute across categories

This is BAD



This is BETTER



# Visualizing time

# Showing changes over time

Time is just a variable that can be mapped to an aesthetic

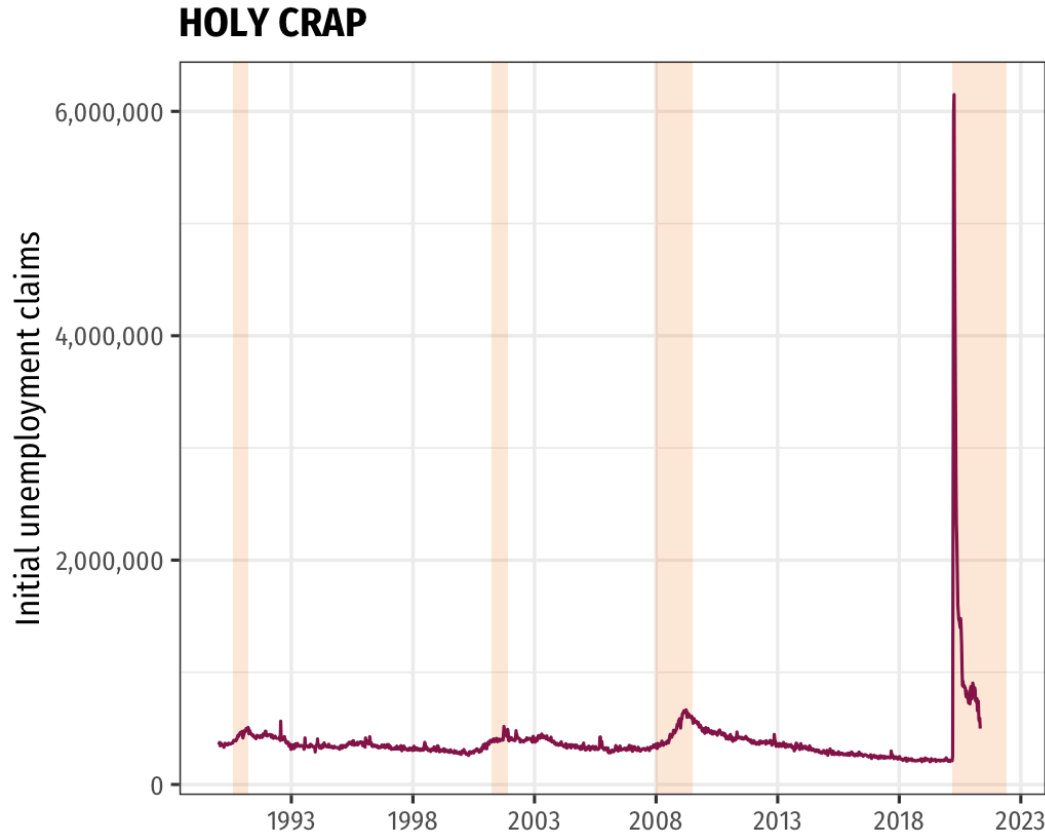
Can be used as `x`, `y`, `color`, `fill`, `facet`, and even animation

Can use all sorts of `geom` S:  
lines, columns, points, heatmaps, densities, maps, etc.

In general, follow reading conventions to show time progression:



## Initial unemployment claims



## Front page of the New York Times, May 9, 2020



## Time on x-axis + geom\_tile()

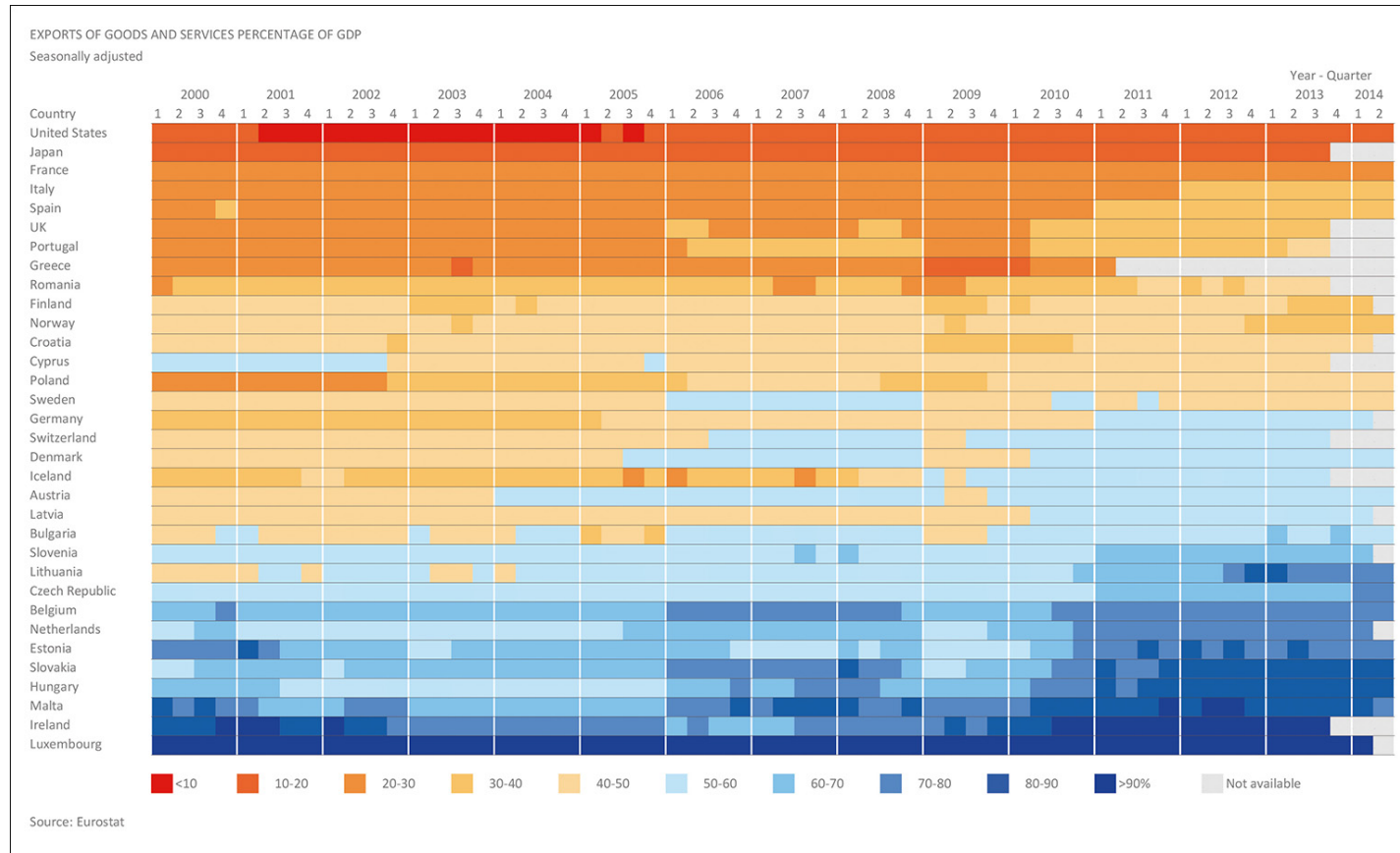
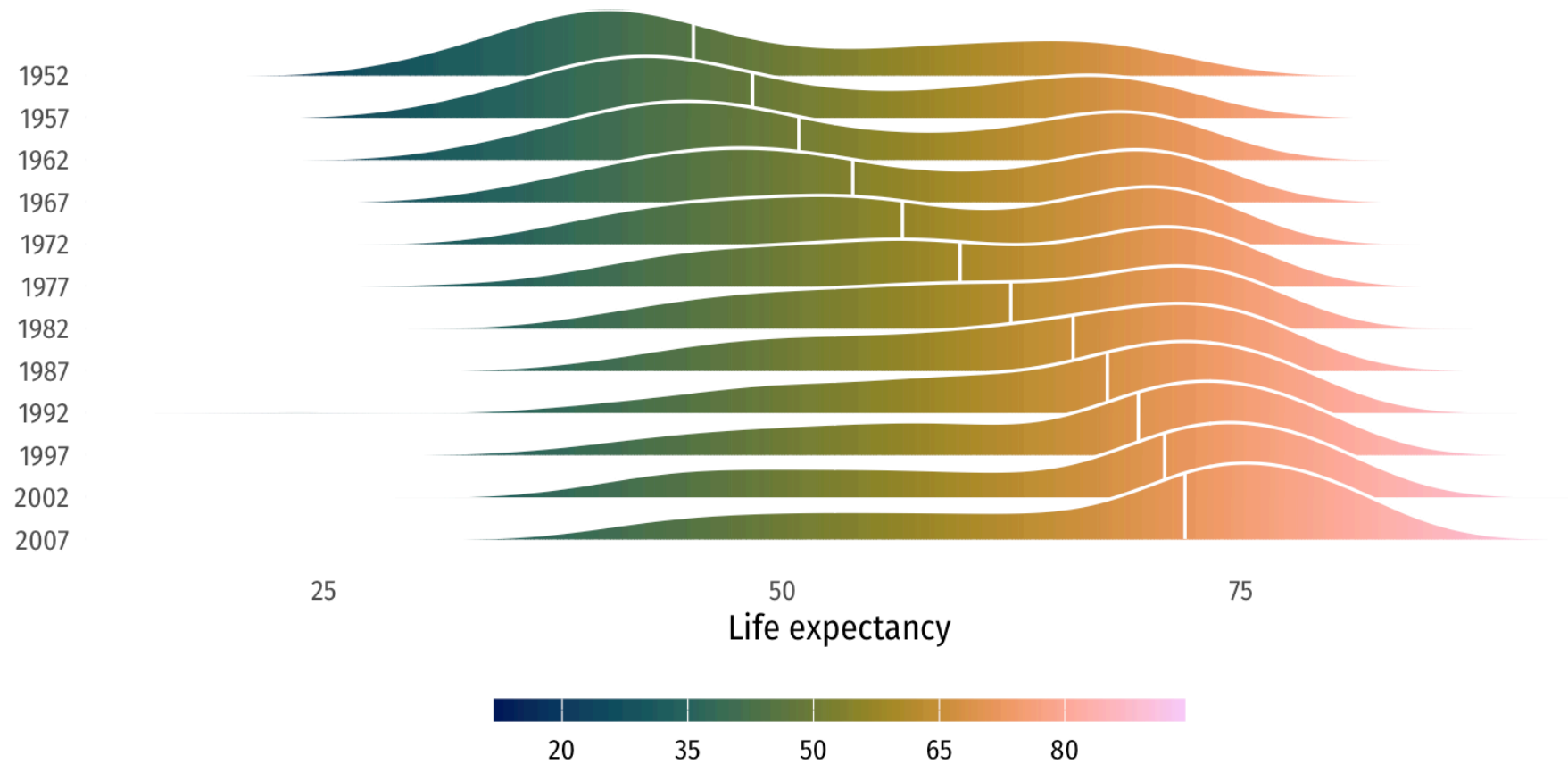


Figure 8.28 in Alberto Cairo's *The Truthful Art*: Heat map by Jorge Camões

# Time on y-axis + geom\_density()



# Time in animation + `geom_point()`



# Time in maps

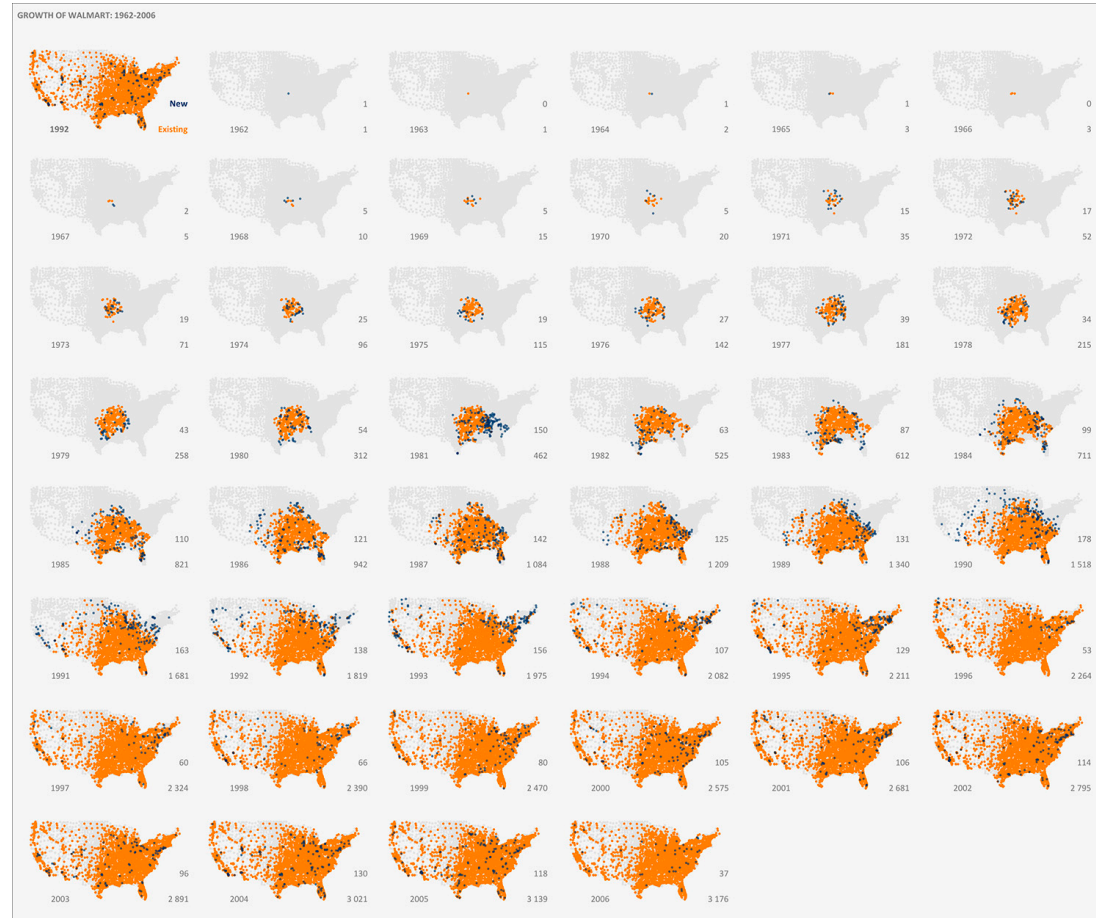
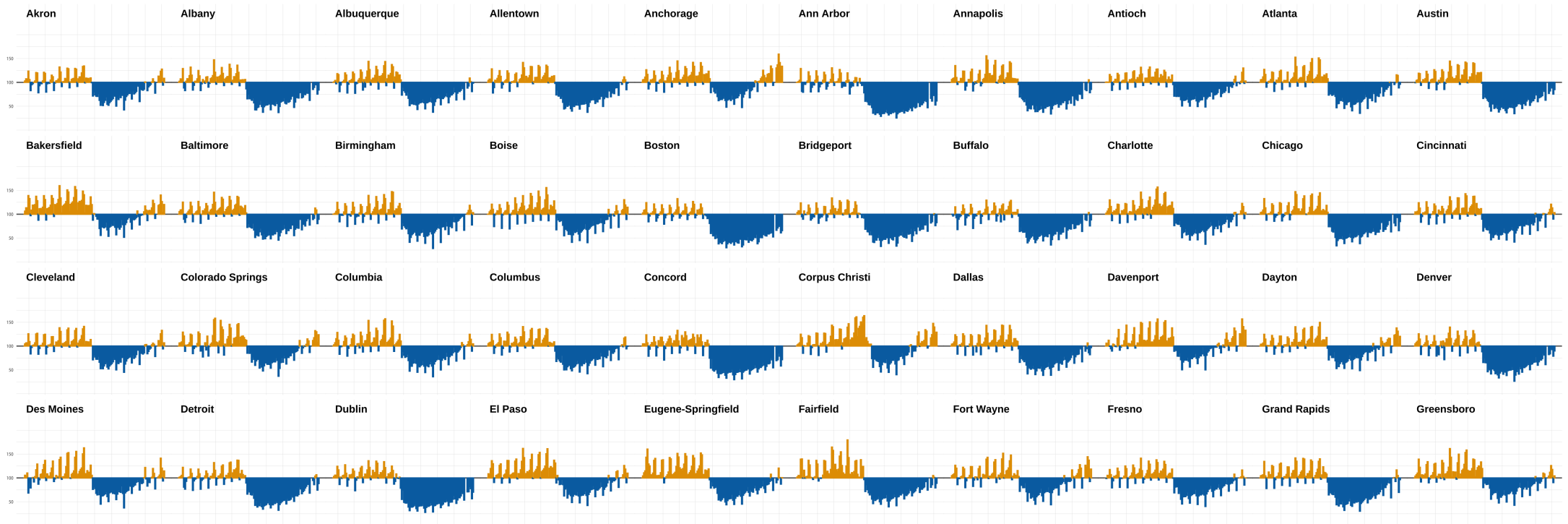


Figure 8.30 in Alberto Cairo's *The Truthful Art: Map of the spread of Walmart* by Jorge Camões

# Time in `geom_col()` + small multiples

## Driving Trends in One Hundred American Cities, January 13th - May 18th, 2020

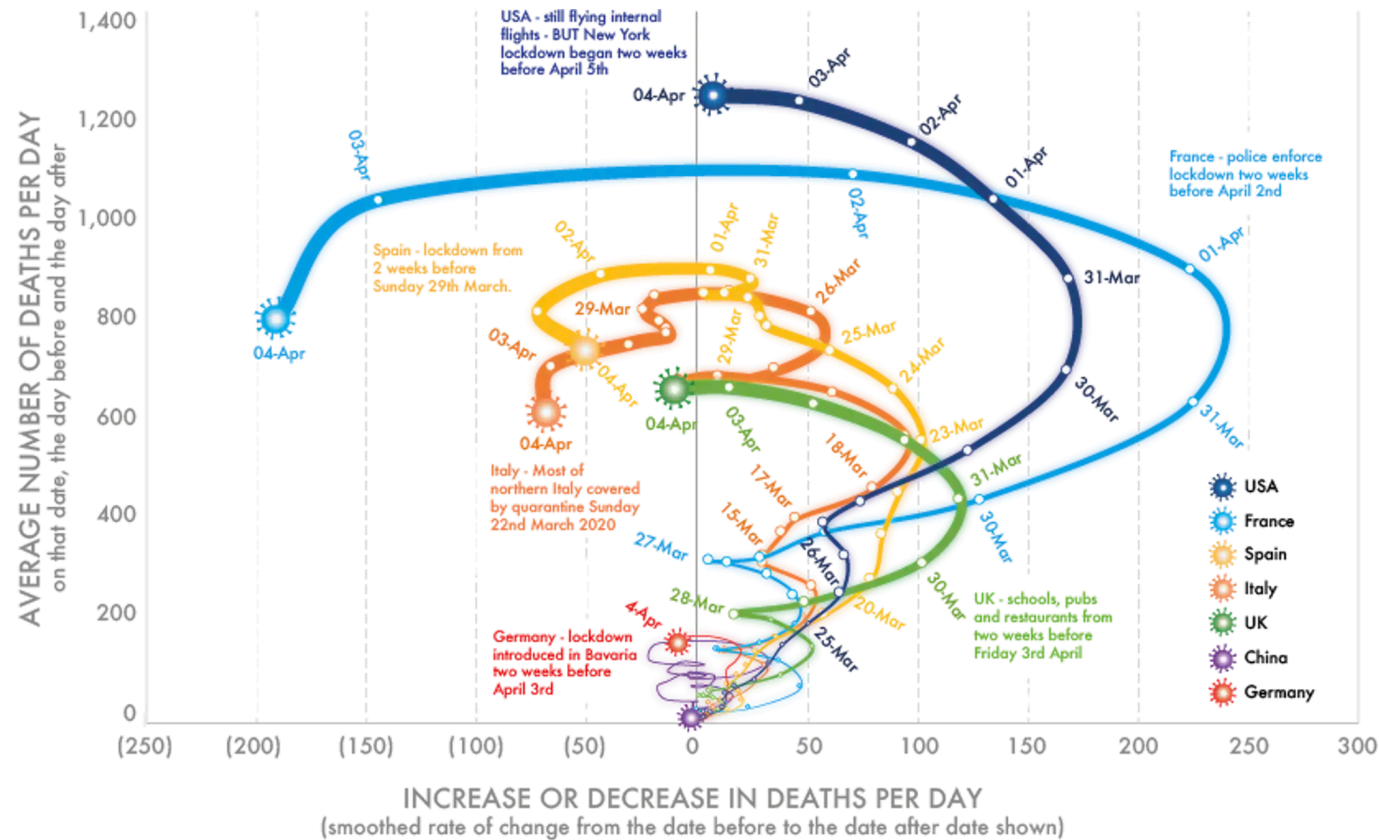
Data are indexed to 100 for each city's usage on January 13th.



Kieran Healy, "The Kitchen Counter Observatory"



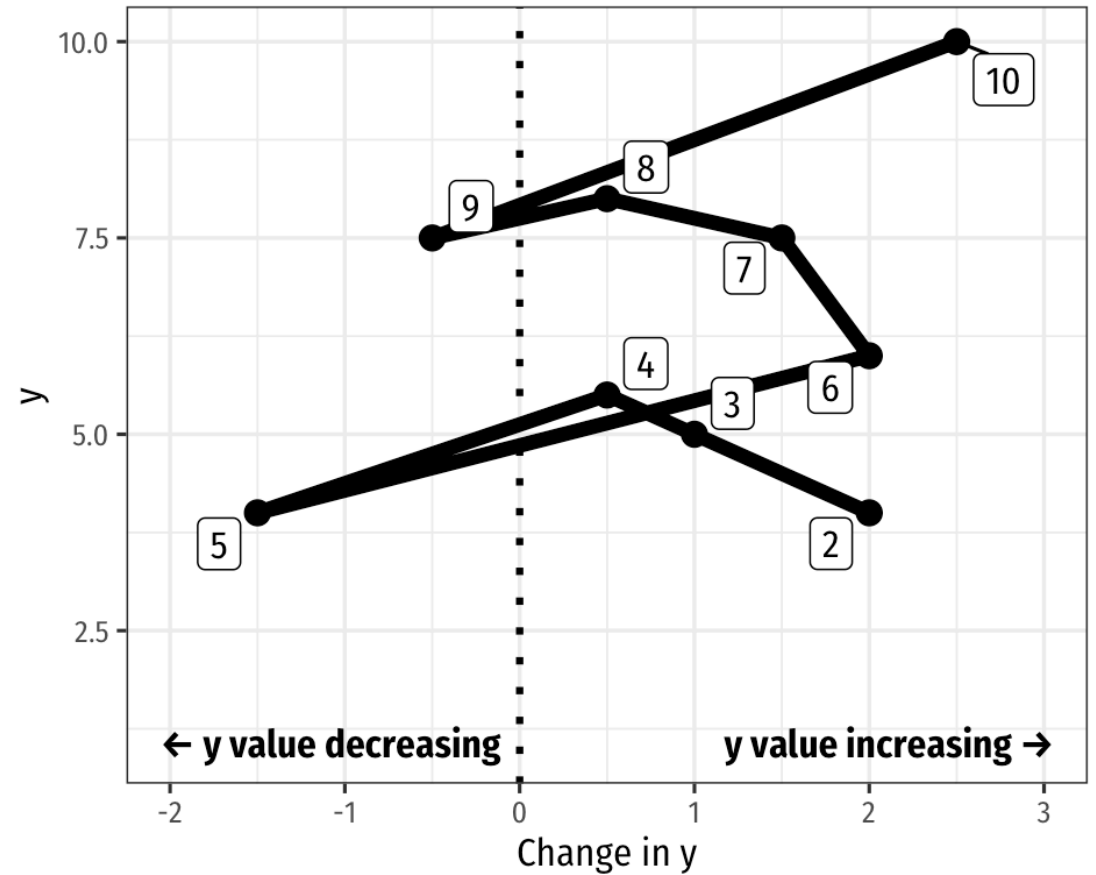
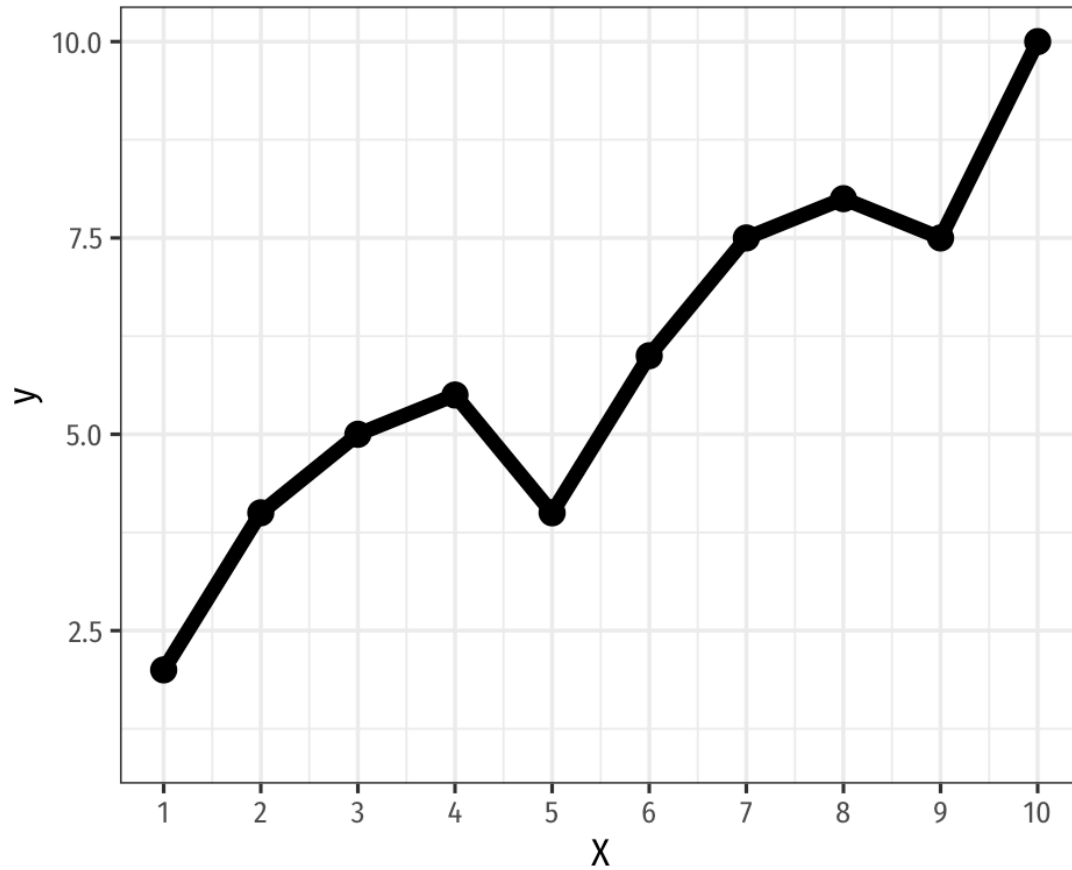
# Don't go wild with time mapping!



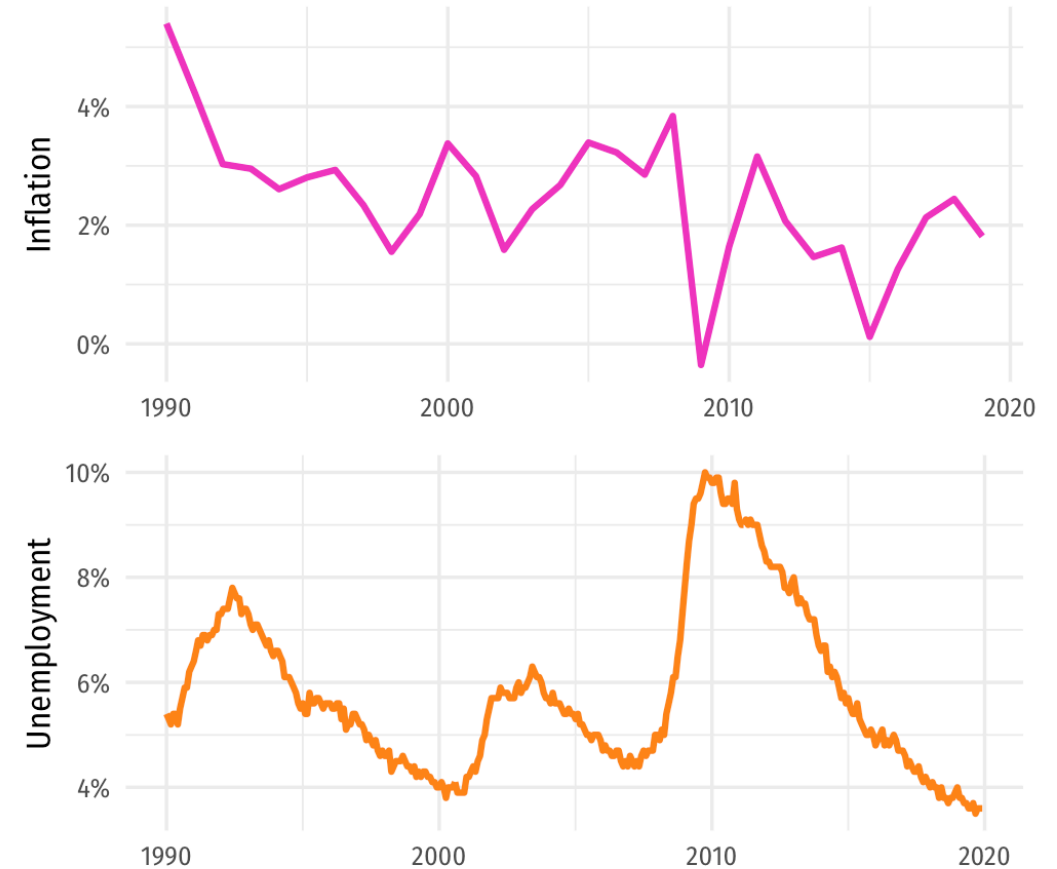
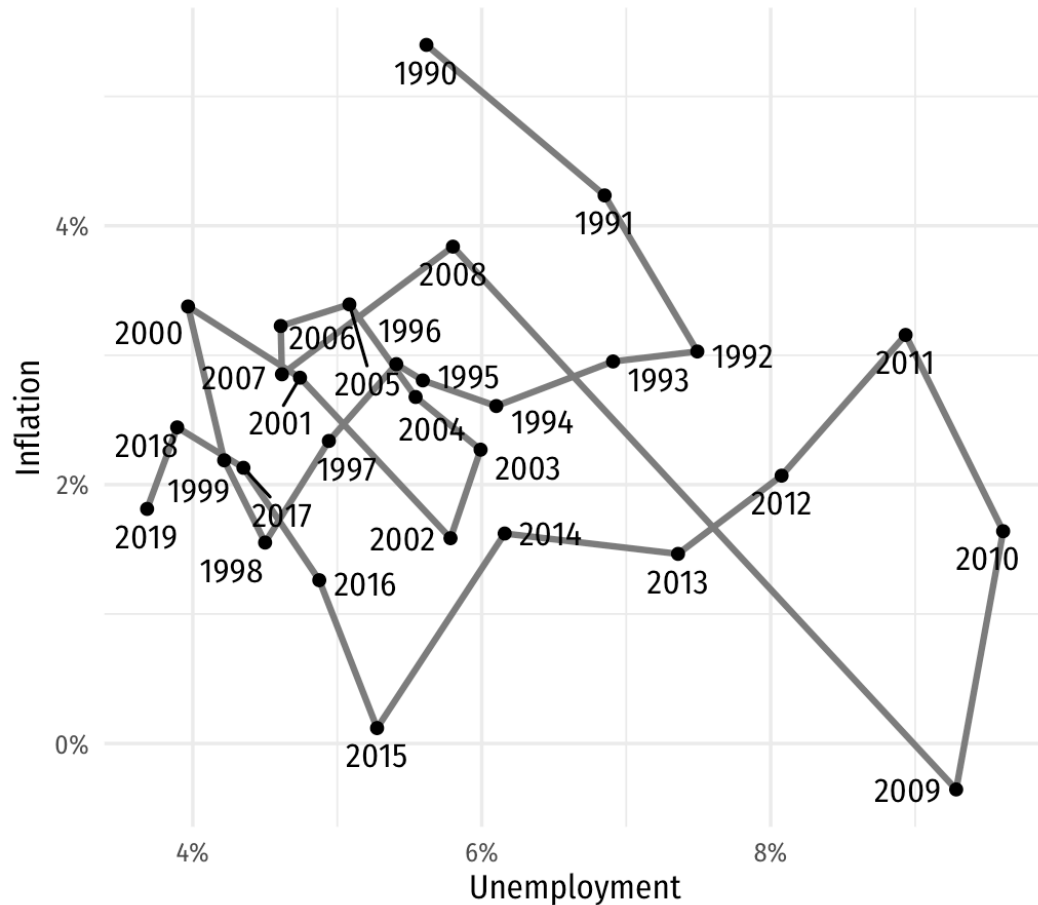
Danny Dorling/Kirsten McClure, Author provided

**Tornado plot:** When a curve crosses the left of the central axis, the number of deaths per day falls

# Interpreting tornado plots



# Better with multiple plots





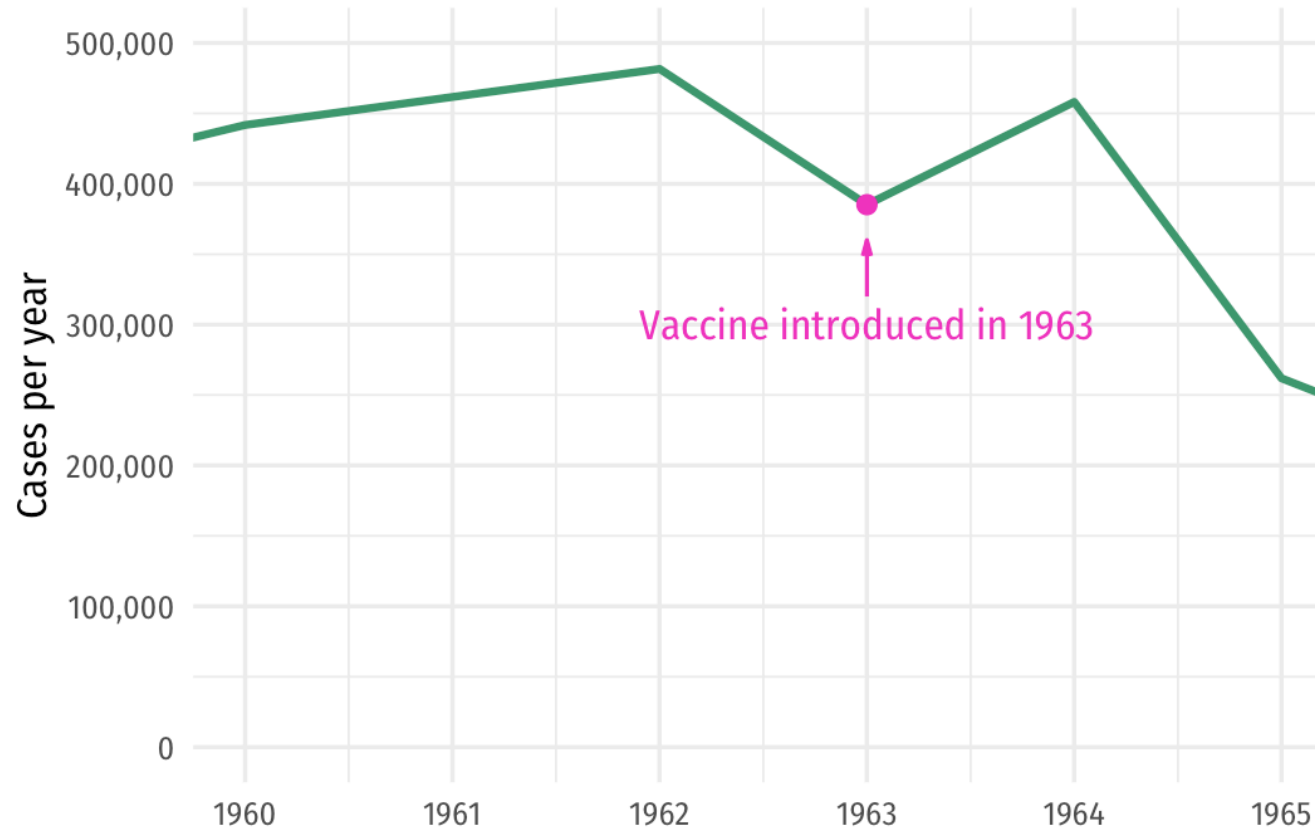
# Starting, ending, and decomposing time



**You always have to choose  
a start and end point**

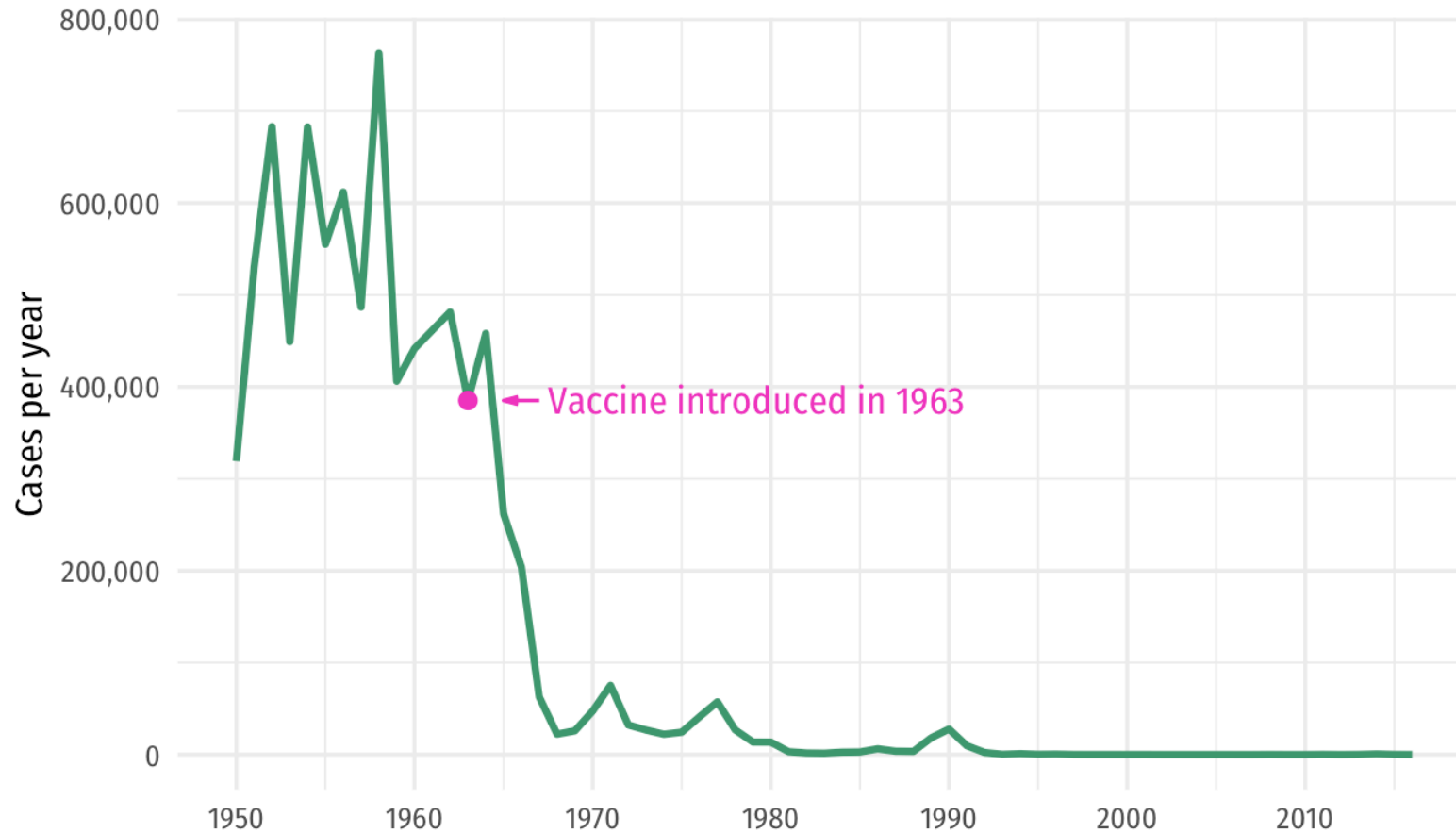
**Start and end at reasonable times that  
help maintain the context of the story**

# Measles vaccine was pretty effective!



Source: CDC, Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases, 13th Edition

# Measles vaccine was *incredible*!

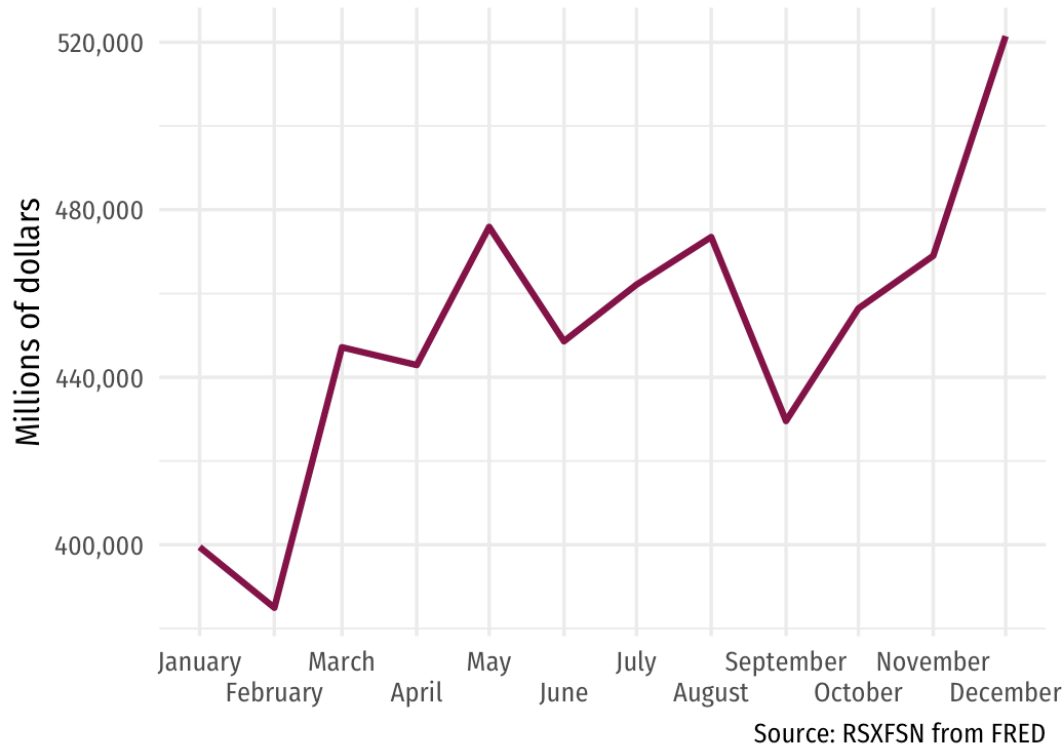


Source: CDC, Epidemiology and Prevention of Vaccine-Preventable Diseases, 13th Edition

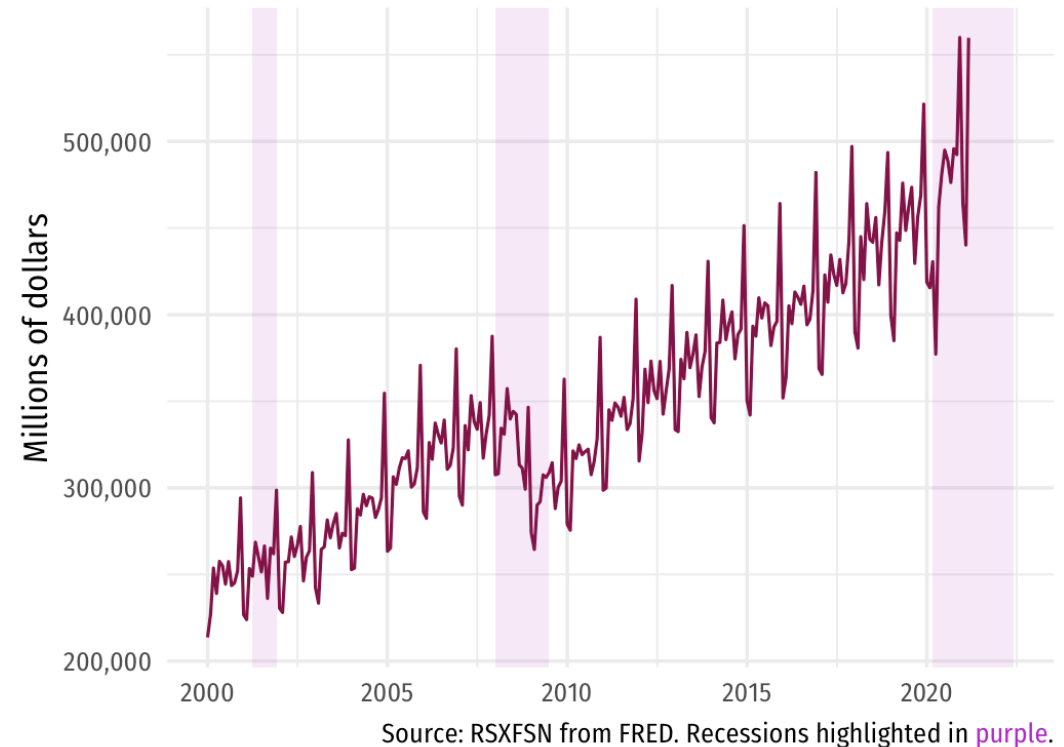
# Seasonality

**Don't mistake seasonality for actual trends**

**Total 2019 retail sales in the United States**

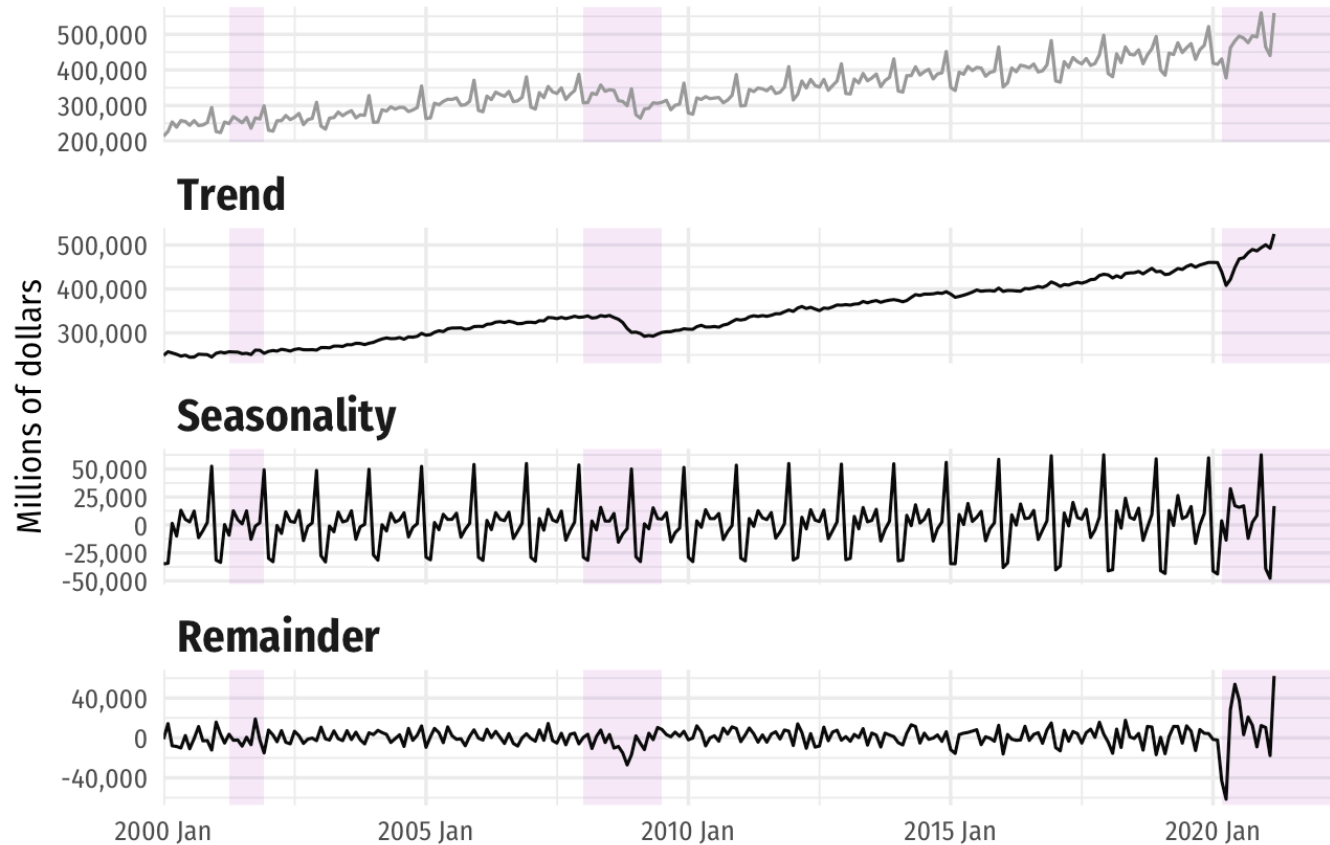


**Total retail sales in the United States, 2000–2019**



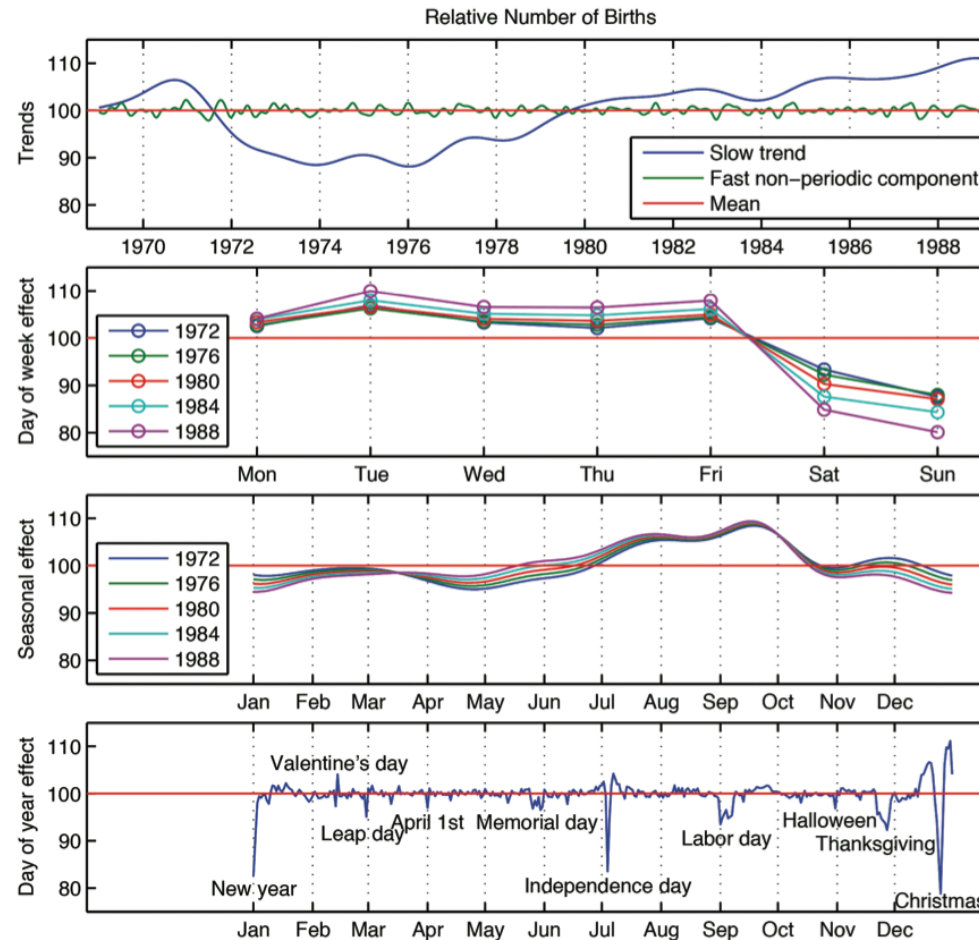
# Decomposition

**Total retail sales in the United States, 2000–2019**



Source: RSXFSN from FRED. Recessions highlighted in purple.

# Birthday decomposition



Cover of Andrew Gelman, et al., *Bayesian Data Analysis*