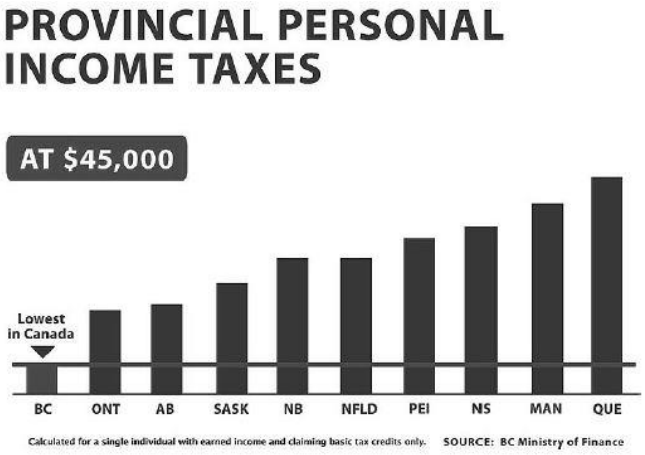
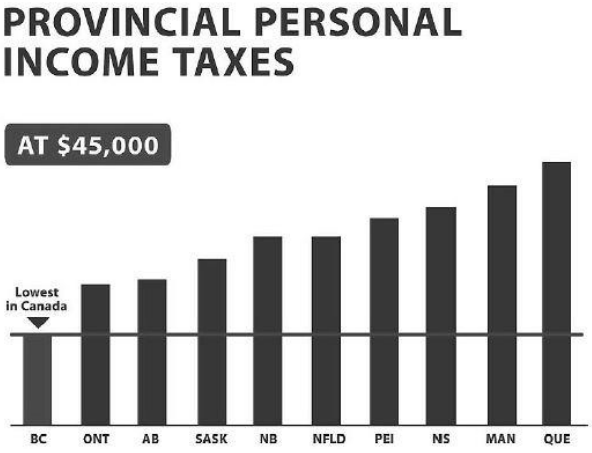
Why All Charts Should Start at Zero



► In 2010, in crisis because of the HST, B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell gave a TV address in which he emphasized how his government had reduced income taxes to some of the lowest rates in Canada. The chart at left was used to illustrate his point.

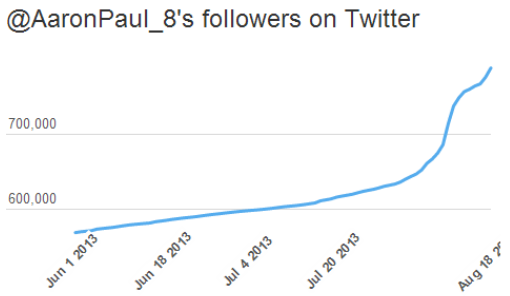
► Looking at that chart, how much higher do you think income taxes are in Ontario? Twice as high? Three times as high?

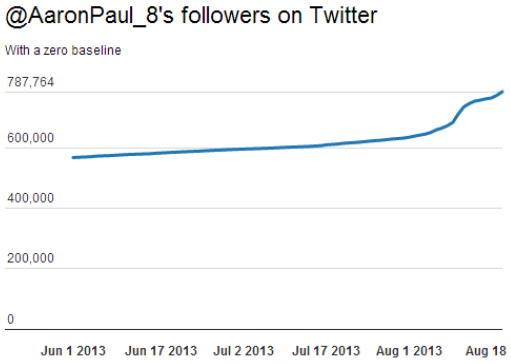
► Now look at the chart on the right. How much higher do Ontario income taxes look now? 50% or less, right?



► The difference between the two charts? The one above used **$1,000** as its **baseline**, or starting point. The one on the right used **zero**.

► Using **any number other than zero** as your chart's baseline is misleading. This is particularly true if, like Campbell, you don't label what you're doing (by putting a $1,000 by the baseline). But even if you *do* label your axis, the impression your chart provides will still be misleading.





► Using a baseline other than zero makes line graphs misleading, too, as in the example above left used by Twitter to show the growth in Breaking Bad star Aaron Paul's Twitter followers. Or this business website's graph showing a "big change" in the stock market.

► This is a good example of the rule of thumb that **your chart should makes sense with the numbers removed**. Using a baseline other than zero means, almost by definition, that your chart will give a false impression with the numbers removed.