

# phinterval: An R package for representing and manipulating time spans with gaps

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Software

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Submitted:

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## Summary

`phinterval` is an R (R Core Team 2022) package for representing and manipulating time spans that may include gaps. It implements the `phinterval` vector class, designed as a generalization of the `lubridate` (Gromelund and Wickham 2011) package's `Interval` class.

While existing interval classes represent contiguous spans of time defined by a start and an end point, each element of a `phinterval` is a union of zero or more disjoint intervals. This allows empty time spans (e.g., the intersection of two non-overlapping events) and disjoint time spans (e.g., a student's periods of enrollment in school separated by breaks) to be treated as first-class objects and manipulated using well-defined set operations.

Functionality for working with these time spans includes:

- Set Operations: Vectorized union, intersection, difference, and complement.
- Merging of overlapping and adjacent intervals into minimal non-overlapping sets.
- Tests for whether time spans, dates, or times fall within one another or overlap.

The package is designed to work seamlessly with `lubridate`: all `phinterval` functions accept either `Interval` or `phinterval` vectors as input, enabling analysts to safely drop `phinterval` functions into their existing workflows.

## Statement of Need

Accurately representing and manipulating dates and times is challenging due to complexities such as time zone adjustments, daylight saving transitions, and leap years or seconds. As a result, temporal data analysis is a common source of frustration and error-prone or difficult-to-maintain code (Gromelund and Wickham 2011; Tiwari et al. 2025). Several R packages provide intuitive interfaces that handle these complexities automatically. In particular, `lubridate`, which is widely used for date-time manipulation in R, and `ivs` (Vaughan 2023) simplify the representation and manipulation of time spans, reducing users' cognitive load and the likelihood of mistakes.

To the author's knowledge, however, no existing package provides a first-class representation of empty or disjoint time spans. Users encountering these spans, for example, the intersection of two non-overlapping intervals, receive an error (as in `ivs`) or unintuitive results (as in `lubridate`), forcing workarounds and potentially leading to uncaught mistakes.

The `phinterval` package addresses this gap by providing explicit representations of disjoint and empty time spans and defining set operations whose results are always valid `phinterval` objects. By closely mirroring the `lubridate` interface and accepting `Interval` vectors as input, `phinterval` minimizes adoption costs while enabling safe and intuitive manipulation of arbitrary time spans. The package is intended for analysts and researchers

working with temporal data in settings such as event studies and observational data analysis.

## Examples

The following examples demonstrate how `phinterval` functions can be used as drop-in replacements for `lubridate` operations, providing correct results for empty or disjoint intervals that would otherwise produce errors or ambiguous output.

```
library(phinterval)

jan_1_to_9 <- interval(as.Date("2000-01-01"), as.Date("2000-01-09"))
jan_2_to_3 <- interval(as.Date("2000-01-02"), as.Date("2000-01-03"))
jan_5_to_9 <- interval(as.Date("2000-01-05"), as.Date("2000-01-09"))
```

In `lubridate`, the intersection of non-overlapping intervals returns an object with missing endpoints, resulting in ambiguity between genuinely empty time spans and missing data. `phinterval` explicitly represents empty time spans as a `<hole>`.

```
lubridate::intersect(jan_2_to_3, jan_5_to_9)
```

```
## [1] NA--NA
phint_intersect(jan_2_to_3, jan_5_to_9)
```

```
## <phinterval<UTC>[1]>
## [1] <hole>
```

Standard interval classes cannot represent gaps within a single observation, but `phinterval` handles these naturally.

```
try(lubridate::setdiff(jan_1_to_9, jan_2_to_3))
```

```
## Error in setdiff.Interval(jan_1_to_9, jan_2_to_3) :
##   Cases 1 result in discontinuous intervals.
```

```
phint_setdiff(jan_1_to_9, jan_2_to_3)
```

```
## <phinterval<UTC>[1]>
## [1] {2000-01-01--2000-01-02, 2000-01-03--2000-01-09}
```

In addition to standard set operations, `phinterval` provides specialized functions for working with intervals with gaps. For example, `phint_squash()` flattens a vector of intervals into a minimal set of non-overlapping time spans, while `phint_invert()` returns the gaps between disjoint intervals.

These functions are useful for summarizing longitudinal event data, such as periods of employment and intervening unemployment:

```
jobs <- dplyr::tribble(
  ~name,    ~job_title,           ~start,      ~end,
  "Greg",   "Mascot",            "2018-01-01",  "2018-06-03",
  "Greg",   "Chief of Staff",   "2019-03-01",  "2020-11-28",
  "Tom",    "Chairman",          "2019-05-01",  "2020-11-10",
  "Tom",    "CEO",               "2020-11-10",  "2020-12-31",
  "Shiv",   "Political Consultant", "2017-01-01", "2019-04-01"
)

employment <- jobs |>
  dplyr::mutate(span = interval(start, end)) |>
```

```

dplyr::group_by(name) |>
dplyr::summarize(employment = phint_squash(span))

employment

## # A tibble: 3 x 2
##   name                           employment
##   <chr>                         <phint<UTC>>
## 1 Greg  {2018-01-01--2018-06-03, 2019-03-01--2020-11-28}
## 2 Shiv {2017-01-01--2019-04-01}
## 3 Tom  {2019-05-01--2020-12-31}

All phinterval functions are vectorized, making them well suited for data analysis.

employment |>
  dplyr::mutate(
    # How long were workers employed, unemployed?
    n_emp_days = employment / lubridate::ddays(1),

    # Where were the gaps in workers' employment?
    unemployment = phint_invert(employment)
  ) |>
  dplyr::select(name, n_emp_days, unemployment)

## # A tibble: 3 x 3
##   name  n_emp_days      unemployment
##   <chr>     <dbl>        <phint<UTC>>
## 1 Greg       791 {2018-06-03--2019-03-01}
## 2 Shiv       820          <hole>
## 3 Tom        610          <hole>

```

## References

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