

# Why is Halloween starting so much earlier each year? A business professor explains

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Halloween is a fun, scary time for children and adults alike – but why does the holiday seem to start so much earlier every year? Decades ago, when I was young, Halloween was a much smaller affair, and people didn't start preparing until mid-October. Today, in my neighborhood near where I grew up in Massachusetts, Halloween decorations start appearing in the middle of summer.

What's changed isn't just when we celebrate but how: Halloween has evolved from a simple folk tradition to a massive commercial event. As a business school professor who has studied the economics of holidays for years, I'm astounded by how the business of Halloween has grown. And understanding why it's such big business may help explain why it's creeping earlier and earlier.

## The business of Halloween

Halloween's roots lie in a Celtic holiday honoring the dead, later adapted by the Catholic Church as a time to remember saints. Today it's largely a secular celebration – one that gives people from all backgrounds a chance to dress up, engage in fantasy and safely confront their fears.

That broad appeal has fueled explosive growth. The National Retail Federation has surveyed Americans about their Halloween plans each September since 2005. Back then, slightly more than half of Americans said they planned to celebrate. In 2025, nearly three-quarters said they would – a huge jump in 20 years.

And people are planning to shell out more money than ever. Total spending on Halloween is expected to reach a record US\$13 billion this year, according to the federation – an almost fourfold increase over the past two decades. Adjusting for inflation and population growth, I found that the average American will spend an expected \$38 on Halloween this year – up from just \$18 per person back in 2005. That's a lot of candy corn.

Candy imports show a similar trend. September has long been the key month for the candy trade, with imports about one-fifth higher than during the rest of the year. Back in September 2005, the U.S. imported about \$250 million of the sweet stuff. In September 2024, that figure had tripled to about \$750 million.

This is part of a larger trend of Halloween becoming a lot more professionalized. For example, when I was a kid, it wasn't unusual for households to pass out brownies, candied apples and other homemade treats to trick-or-treaters. But because of safety concerns and food allergies, for decades Americans have been warned to stick to mass-produced, individually wrapped candies.

The same shift has happened with costumes. Years ago, many people made their own; today, store-bought costumes dominate — even for pets.

## **Why Halloween keeps creeping earlier**

While there's no definitive research establishing why Halloween seems to start earlier each year, the increase in spending is one major driver.

Halloween items are seasonal, which means no one wants to buy giant plastic skeletons on Nov. 1. As total spending grows, retailers order more inventory, and the cost of storing ever-larger amounts of unsold items until the next year becomes a bigger consideration.

Once a season's commercial footprint becomes large enough, retailers begin ordering and displaying merchandise long before it's actually needed. For example, winter coats start appearing in stores in early fall and are typically gone when the snow starts falling. It's the same with Halloween: Retailers put out merchandise early to ensure they're not stuck with unsold goods once the season is over.

They also often price strategically – charging full price when items first hit the shelves, appealing to eager early shoppers, and then marking down prices closer to the holiday. This clears shelves and warehouses, making room for the next upcoming shopping season.

Over the past two decades, Halloween has become an ever-bigger commercial holiday. The growth in people enjoying the holiday and the increase in spending has resulted in Halloween becoming one giant treat for businesses. The big trick for retailers is preventing this holiday from starting before the Fourth of July.

Jay L. Zagorsky does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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