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Housing Market Weakness Depends on Perspective

This week's **biggest housing-related headline** was the drop to a 3-year low in Existing Home Sales. This is just the latest in a series of reports that suggests housing has turned some sort of scary corner. But drawing the line between fear and reality can be a matter of perspective.

Has housing data actually weakened in the past year? Undoubtedly! There's really **no denying or debating** that fact. But home sales dropped in a similar way in 2013 after the last comparable spike in interest rates only to go on to new long-term highs by the middle of 2015.

We **can't really know** if housing will recover in a similar way this time, and that's exactly the point! Nothing we've seen so far is much of a surprise in the context of the interest rate spike. In fact, if anything, the surprise is how **well** housing continued to do after the first phase of the rate spike in late 2016. It wasn't until the 2nd phase in 2018 that sales finally capitulated.

National Average Mortgage Rates

	Rate	Change	Points
Mortgage News Daily			
30 Yr. Fixed	6.89%	0.00	0.00
15 Yr. Fixed	6.33%	+0.01	0.00
30 Yr. FHA	6.33%	+0.01	0.00
30 Yr. Jumbo	7.05%	0.00	0.00
5/1 ARM	6.58%	0.00	0.00
Freddie Mac			
30 Yr. Fixed	6.77%	-0.09	0.00
15 Yr. Fixed	6.05%	-0.11	0.00

Rates as of: 7/22

Market Data

	Price / Yield	Change
MBS UMBS 5.5	99.39	-0.01
MBS GNMA 5.5	99.78	+0.00
10 YR Treasury	4.2379	-0.0146
30 YR Treasury	4.4561	-0.0164

Pricing as of: 7/23 12:38AM EST

Recent Housing Data

		Value	Change
Mortgage Apps	Jul 10	206.1	-0.19%
Building Permits	Mar	1.46M	-3.95%
Housing Starts	Mar	1.32M	-13.15%
New Home Sales	Mar	693K	+4.68%
Pending Home Sales	Feb	75.6	+1.75%
Existing Home Sales	Feb	3.97M	-0.75%
Builder Confidence	Mar	51	+6.25%

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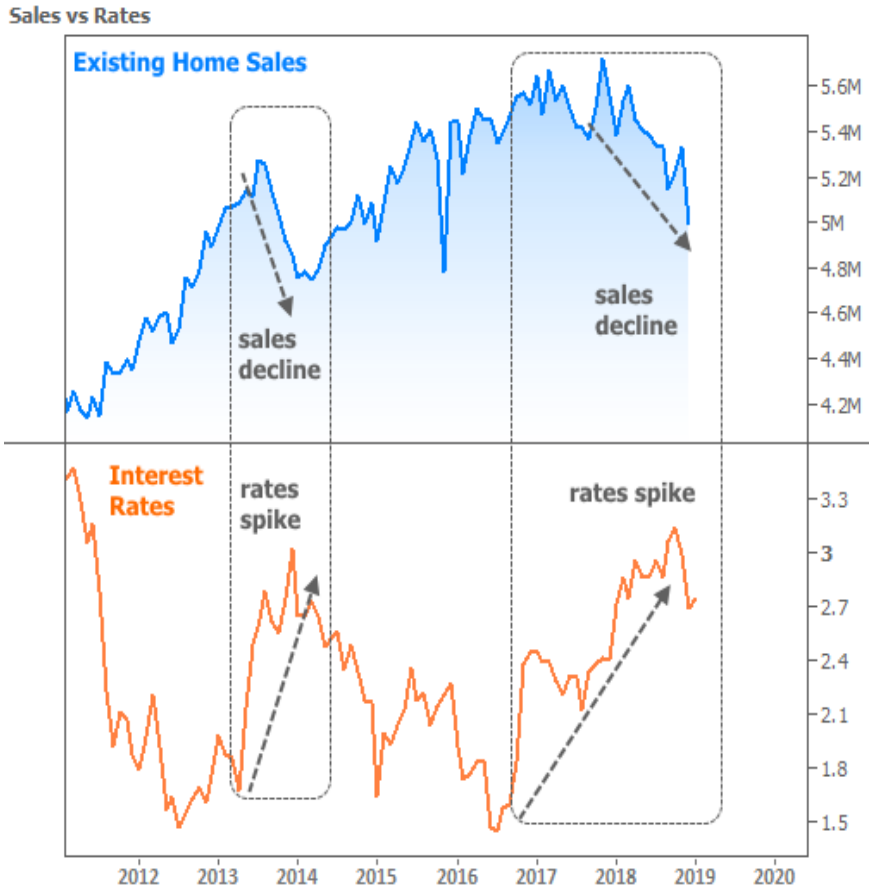
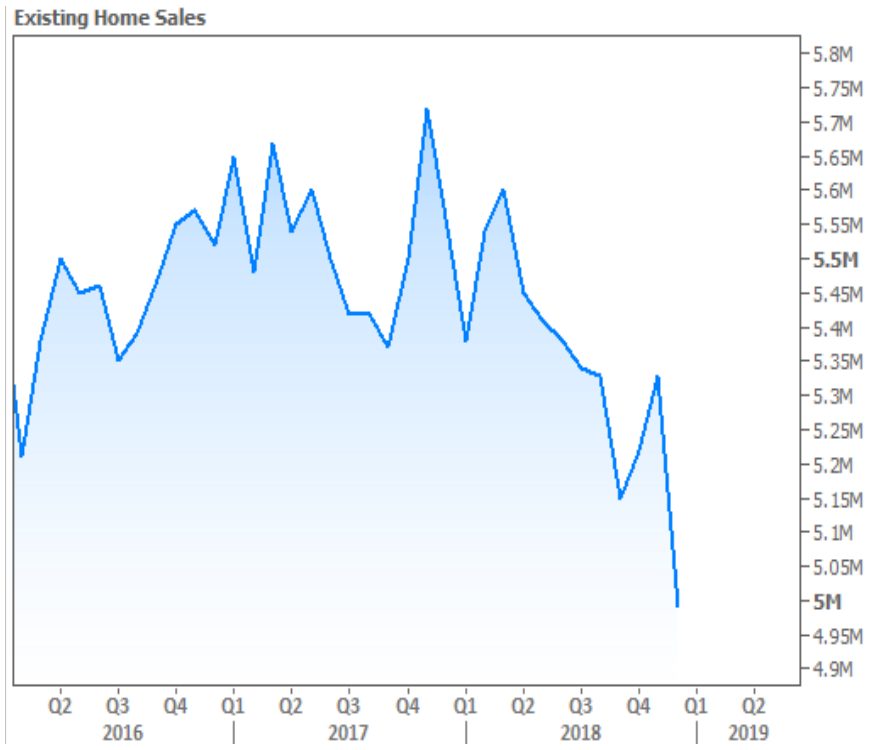


Now forget the interest rate considerations above and simply focus on perspective and context. Just by changing the time period on the chart, we can paint **vastly different pictures**. The most downbeat pictures are those that compare current levels to the long-term highs seen in 2017.



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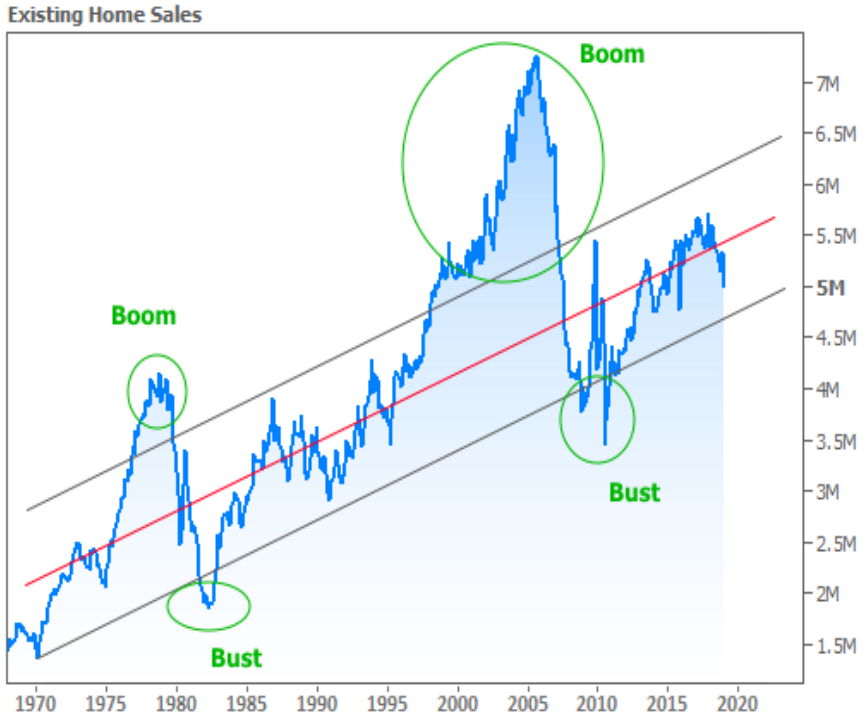
Things change as we zoom out to wider points of view. This could still look a bit gloomy depending on your perspective, but much less so than the previous chart:

If we continue to zoom out, the longer-term trend emerges. In this chart, it's actually easier to make a case for housing market **strength**. The red line is a simple linear regression from before the 2000's housing boom. When sales are under that line, it signifies opportunity to improve. Additionally, it's reassuring to see that sales are **not** currently falling from one of their boom cycles (those have been the worst times for the housing market).



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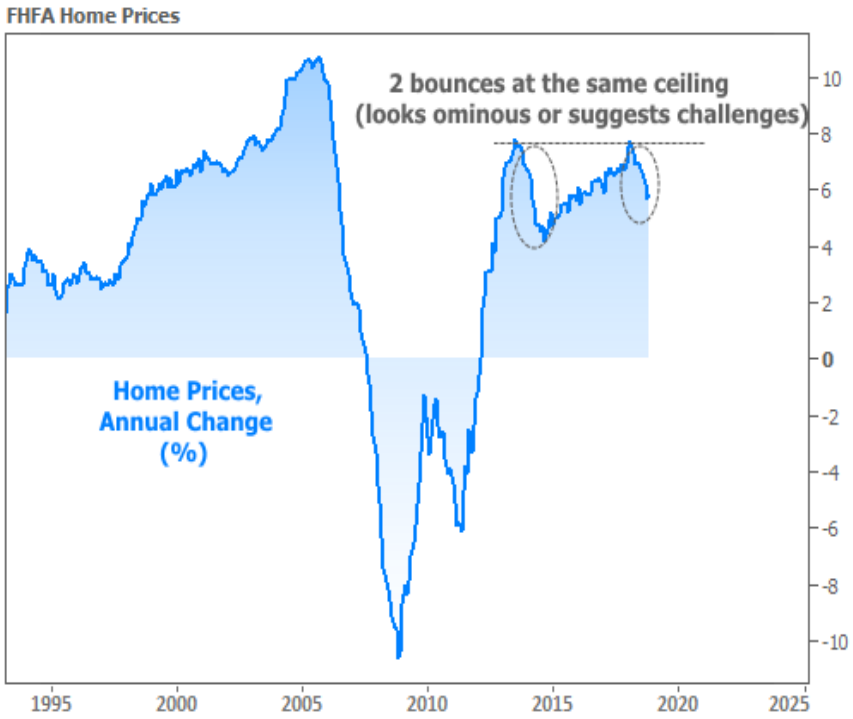
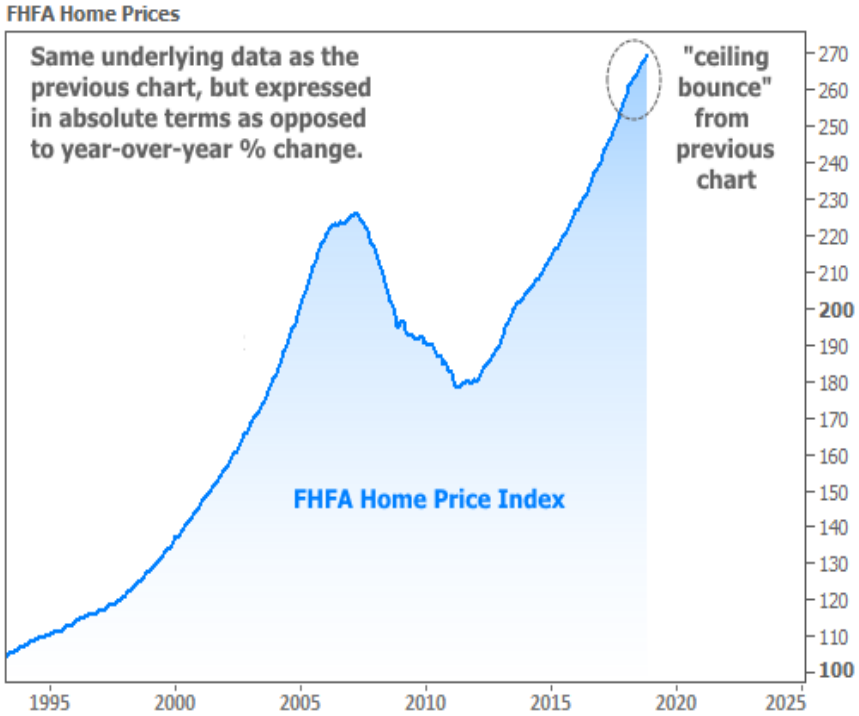
Perspective can have an impact on our assessment when it comes to home **prices** as well. The latest home price report from the FHFA (Fannie and Freddie's regulator) was also released this week. Home prices are commonly reported in terms of year-over-year change. This is a useful practice as it allows us to see changes in trends more easily. Here too, we see the ill effects of the 2013 and 2018 rate spikes as well as a potentially ominous ceiling blocking further progress.



But **let's ask ourselves** if we'd really want home prices to accelerate faster and faster when they've already spent several years in the 5-7% range. That doesn't sound sustainable in an economy where wage growth only recently made it back to 3%. Perhaps **more importantly**, let's ask ourselves why a drop in the pace of appreciation is a bad thing if prices are still moving up. For instance, here's what the same data looks like when we chart the outright level of FHFA's home price index.



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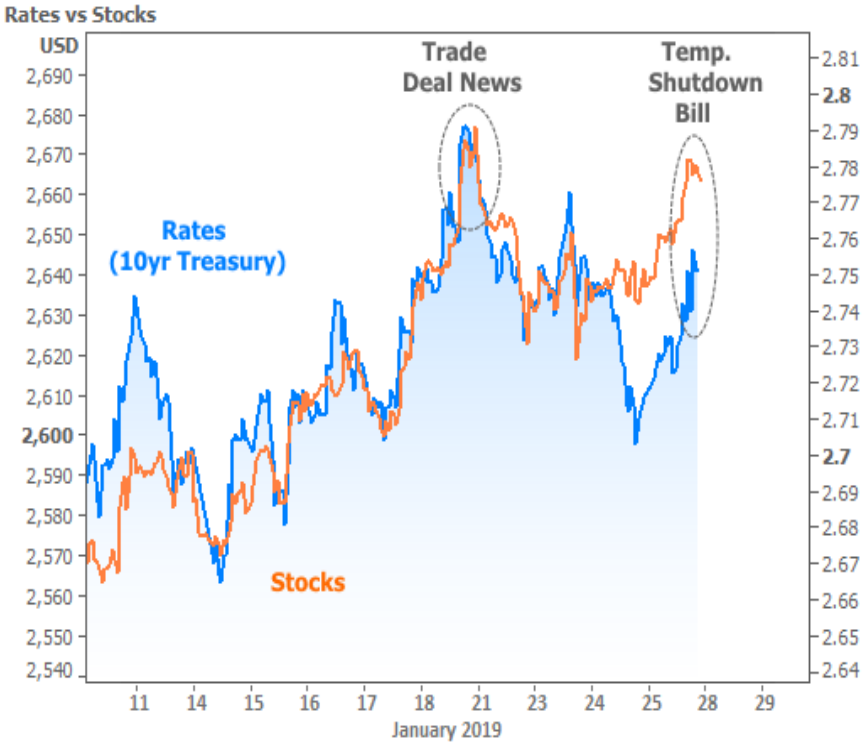
The point of all this is to reiterate that different cases can be made simply by using different techniques to present the **exact same** data.

In financial markets, stocks and bonds/rates spent the first part of the week moving lower before bouncing on Friday as odds improved for a temporary re-opening of the government. The temporary nature of the solution likely accounts for the absence of a bigger market reaction. Neither stocks nor bonds were willing to move back to the levels seen after last week's trade-related news.



Next week brings **two key events** that were on the schedule regardless of the shutdown. The Federal Reserve will release an updated policy statement on Wednesday afternoon. They **won't** be raising rates at this meeting. In fact, many investors think we'll see the Fed strike a softer tone compared to December's announcement. Such things are usually good for rates, but if investors were in broad agreement about that likelihood, rates would have already benefited from those expectations.

Then on Friday, we'll get the next installment of the government's official jobs report--always one of the biggest potential sources of volatility for interest rates. As of Friday afternoon, the government hasn't announced a tentative schedule for releasing any of the data that had been on hold during the shutdown.

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Recent Economic Data

Date	Event	Actual	Forecast	Prior
Tuesday, Jan 22				
10:00AM	Dec Existing home sales (ml)	4.99	5.25	5.32
10:00AM	Dec Exist. home sales % chg (%)	-6.4	-1.0	1.9
Wednesday, Jan 23				
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	272.5		278.5

Event Importance:

No Stars = Insignificant
☆ Low
★ Moderate
★★ Important
★★ Very Important

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Date	Event	Actual	Forecast	Prior
7:00AM	w/e Mortgage Refinance Index	1110.5		1172.4
Thursday, Jan 24				
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	199	211	213
10:00AM	Dec Leading index chg mm (%)	-0.1	-0.1	0.2
Monday, Jan 28				
11:30AM	2-Yr Note Auction (bl)	40		
1:00PM	5-Yr Note Auction (bl)	41		
Tuesday, Jan 29				
9:00AM	Nov CaseShiller 20 yy (%)	+4.7	4.9	5.0
1:00PM	7-Yr Note Auction (bl)	32		
Wednesday, Jan 30				
7:00AM	w/e MBA Purchase Index	266.2		272.5
7:00AM	w/e Mortgage Refinance Index	1049.9		1110.5
10:00AM	Dec Pending Home Sales (%)	-2.2	0.5	-0.9
10:00AM	Dec Pending Sales Index	99.0		101.2
2:00PM	N/A FOMC rate decision (%)	2.250 - 2.500	2.375	2.375
Thursday, Jan 31				
8:30AM	w/e Jobless Claims (k)	253	227	199
9:45AM	Jan Chicago PMI	56.7	61.5	65.4
Friday, Feb 01				
8:30AM	Jan Non-farm payrolls (k)	+304	165	312
8:30AM	Jan Unemployment rate mm (%)	4.0	3.9	3.9
8:30AM	Jan Average earnings mm (%)	+0.1	0.3	0.4
10:00AM	Jan ISM Manufacturing PMI	56.6	54.2	54.1
10:00AM	Jan ISM Mfg Prices Paid	49.6	54.5	54.9
10:00AM	Jan Consumer Sentiment (ip)	91.2	90.8	90.7
10:00AM	Jan Consumer Inflation Expectations (1yr) (%)	2.7		2.7
10:00AM	Jan Consumer Inflation Expectations (5yr) (%)	2.6		2.6

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Update: Buyer Broker Agreement

After requests from real estate companies, a nonprofit consumer watchdog group the Consumer Federation of America has developed a list of factors to consider when creating a buyer contract in preparation for upcoming practice changes in the industry.

CFA released its “Proposed Criteria for Evaluating Home Buyer Contract Forms” on Tuesday. The 15 criteria focus on the contracts’ form — whether the documents are readable and understandable — and content — whether they are fair to homebuyers.

-the document’s expiration date (CFA recommends buyers asks for a three-month contract and never sign one longer than six months)
-the right to terminate the contract
-the disclosure that compensation is negotiable
-the broker’s compensation clearly stated and that the buyer broker can’t receive additional compensation for facilitating a sale
-that any additional fees, such as for showing a home, will be deducted from the broker’s commission if there is a successful sale
-that the commission is due only if there is a successful closing
-that buyers have an obligation — for no longer than 60 days, CFA recommends — to pay a broker who earlier showed them a home they purchased after the contract ended
-seller concessions paid directly to buyers
-dual agency not pre-approved by the contract
-an explanation of how a broker treats different buyer clients interested in the same property
-that buyers should not be required to first go through mediation or arbitration if they have a complaint

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