



## **The Ask U.S. Panel: Preventing the U.S. Census Bureau from Competing with the Private Sector**

The Ask U.S. Panel, the U.S. Census Bureau project developing its own probability-based research panel, is duplicative at best; numerous private sector insights companies and organizations already provide well-established high-quality online panels, including probability-based ones.

**Position: The Census Bureau should use the competitive marketplace of available insights services to acquire pre-existing research services on an as-needed basis, which would reduce public burden and cost taxpayers less money.**

### **Inspector General (IG) Report:**

- The Commerce Department IG’s final report on the Ask U.S. Panel (February 27, 2023, OIG-23-011-I) found that the Census Bureau mismanaged the contract, providing significant taxpayer dollars to a private entity “without validating costs.”
- More importantly, the Bureau “did not document research or analysis conducted to determine whether the need for the Ask U.S. Panel could be met by existing commercial platforms or developed internally.”
- As the IG finished its investigation, the Census Bureau disclosed that it would terminate the contract and that, in the end, the panel “was not developed.” Even so, the Bureau intends to in-source the project, incorporating “elements of the panel into studies the Bureau has underway” and that a new Bureau “panel would have some similar features to the Ask U.S. Panel but would differ in that it would be (1) built on Census systems, by Census staff, using Census data and (2) available on a cost-reimbursable basis for other federal government data collection efforts...”

**The Ask U.S. Panel:** The U.S. Census Bureau had proposed to develop and run “a nationally representative survey panel for tracking public opinion on a variety of topics of interest to numerous federal agencies and their partners, and for conducting experimentation on alternative question wording and methodological approaches.”

**Federal agencies can (and already do) purchase such market research services from the private sector:** Insights providers such as Ipsos, NORC at the University of Chicago, Dynata, SSRS, Gallup, the University of Southern California, and others maintain probability-based research panels that could meet any needs of the Bureau or other federal agencies at significantly lower cost and on a more immediate timeframe than the Bureau developing its own panel. The Census Bureau and other federal agencies already purchase such services regularly. Plenty of other insights companies and organizations with panels could provide probability-based panels if requested.

**An unnecessary financial burden on federal taxpayers:** Besides just the extensive cost and time involved in establishing this duplicative service, the Census Bureau has not considered the immense expertise in data quality, incentive management and delivery, fraud detection, and privacy and permissions management required to successfully maintain this kind of panel. The Bureau has still mentioned no planned procedures to monitor and mitigate attrition of panelists and how it would refresh the pool of available respondents, suggesting that they hope to learn on the fly.

NORC estimates it would cost at least \$25 million to build the kind of online panel sought by the Bureau, with annual maintenance being similarly expensive (as much as \$2 million per year).

**Government competing against the private sector:** Since [1955](#), the federal government has been prohibited from providing “services or products for its own use which could be procured from private enterprise through ordinary business channels,” reiterated regularly by every Administration since, including in OMB Circular A-76 requiring competitive sourcing. The Ask U.S. Panel instead insources a pre-existing commercial activity.

**Proposed CJS appropriations language:** *No funds in this bill may be spent in support or development of the Ask U.S. Panel or any similar effort to develop a survey, opinion or market research service duplicative of private sector offerings.*

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Insights Association | 1629 K Street NW, Suite 300 Washington, DC 20006 | Phone: 202-800-2545 | [www.insightsassociation.org](http://www.insightsassociation.org)