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Census survey changes will boost Obamacare

The Obama administration backed new Census questions that will translate into lower numbers of uninsured

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The U.S. Census Bureau has made major changes to the questions on its annual survey related to health insurance. The effect will make measuring Obamacare's impact next to impossible. If anything, it will help Affordable Care Act proponents mute the law as an election-year issue.

That's convenient for Democrats during midterm campaigning, when they will need to defend the virtues of the contested health care law.

Robert Pear of The New York Times reported these changes, highlighting how the new survey questions regarding health insurance will translate into lower estimates of the uninsured.

This should unsettle people of all political persuasions. The White House has turned a reliable information source into a propaganda tool.

The Times reports the questionnaire for the Current Population Survey has undergone a "total revision to health insurance questions." Basically this will make it difficult to compare census data related to how many people have health care from before and after Obamacare.

Creating a break in the way this data is collected at this moment can only be seen as intentional. Experts have long called for a more accurate survey, as the Census numbers reliably over report the number of uninsured.

Those exaggerated numbers worked very well, however, when politicians pushed for universal health care. Overhauling the questions now should amplify just how many people have insurance — a boon for Obamacare supporters, regardless of whether the higher numbers have anything to do with the health care law.

Defenders of the changes say they will make the Census' survey more accurate. That's a desirable outcome. But standard research practice requires that in the first year after such a major change, the questions be asked and the data reported in both the old way and the new so accurate comparisons can be made. The White House is not doing that.

"Now all the sudden they are interested in getting more accurate information, and it just happens to come at a time when we need a consistent measure of the uninsured to know whether

Obamacare is a success or not,” says Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute.

One of the internal Census documents The Times obtained acknowledges the timing as “coincidental and unfortunate.” “Ideally, the redesign would have had at least a few years to gather base line and trend data,” it states.

The survey previously asked Americans if they had health insurance at any point during the previous year; the new version asks if they have insurance at the time of the interview.

The revised questions, used in a test run, showed fewer uninsured than the previous survey. For instance, in 2013, the standard questionnaire found that 12.5 percent of Americans were uninsured; using the new version, just 10.6 percent didn’t have health coverage.

The Department of Health and Human services and the White House Council of Economic Advisers requested several of the new questions.

And the White House Office of Management and Budget — currently headed by Sylvia Mathews Burwell — approved the revisions. Burwell is Obama’s nominee to replace Kathleen Sebelius at HHS. Sebelius stepped down after taking much heat for the botched roll out of Obamacare health exchanges.

Cannon believes the revision of this survey is more surprising than the administration’s attempts to delay, rewrite and revise the Affordable Care Act. “They aren’t just cooking the books here — they are burning the books,” he says.

Changing the format of this Census Bureau data is a disservice to effective policy making. It also reinforces the growing notion that government numbers can’t be trusted.