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Submitted to **Review of 2021 Census Topics**

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Who you are representing

Industry body/association

If other please specify:

Name of your organisation (if applicable)

Organisation:

Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc.

Please list any other organisations you have collaborated with on this submission.

Who you have consulted with:

Plain Reason

Atheism SA

What is your submission about?

Please provide a brief summary of your submission

Topic name:

The AFA contends that Question 19 of the 2016 Census that read "What is the person's religion?" be broken into two parts: "Does the person have a religion? Yes|No" and "What is the person's religion?"

Whilst the 2016 Census brought the "no religion" option to the top of the possible answers, the structure of the question is still leading in nature, presuming that the person has a religion in the first instance before giving the person the opportunity to specify that they in fact do not have a religion.

Choose your area of interest

Religion

If Other topic please specify:

Assessment Criteria 1

1 This topic is of current national importance.

National Importance:

Current anomalies in the data affects policy decisions and have broad ramifications in relation to social legislation (both state and federal) which are influenced by perceptions of religious affiliation and adherence. Issues affected include planning applications for the development of religious facilities and accompanying traffic

considerations. Issues of funding and taxation also become distorted.

The current bias in the question favours religion and its attendant influence on the Australian political process. One example is the degree of access religious bodies have to government funded education facilities and the government policies which facilitate this access. Religious lobby groups base many of their submissions on ABS data relating to religious affiliation.

Accurate census data reflecting the actual proportion of the population practicing particular religious beliefs is required to ensure the equitable distribution of substantial government funds among both religious organisations on the one hand, and public secular resources and services of broad community benefit on the other hand.

-Courtesy of Atheism SA

Assessment Criteria 2

2 There is a need for data from a Census of the whole population.

For whole population:

There is a need to organise and provide information and events at the community level -- as well as at state and national levels -- to facilitate services and support to secular charities and community organisations. The opportunities and forums for harnessing the efforts of such secular individuals, to the benefit of the broader community, are currently limited (especially when compared with religious forums, which receive the vast majority of government support). We often speak with socially-minded individuals who are reluctant to have their community work ascribed to a particular religion in which they do not believe. Improved statistics for the number of non-religious people in the country will help us, and others, to develop programs to actualise such individuals to the benefit of the broader community.

-Courtesy of Atheism SA

Assessment Criteria 3

3 The topic can be accurately collected in a form which the household completes themselves.

Easy to answer:

A single yes or no answer to the proposed question, "Does the person have a religion?" or "Does the person practice a religion?" make answering it inherently easy. A person does not need to consider the text of the question in any detail as it is only a small alteration from the previous question used and in fact makes it quicker to answer.

Assessment Criteria 4

4 The topic would be acceptable to Census respondents.

Acceptable:

The current question on religion is already optional and leaving it as such would not change the intrusiveness of the question.

Breaking the question into two parts is most likely to lead to more accurate results as it will cause a person answering it to consider first whether they have a religion or not.

In the 2011 Census 22.3 percent claimed 'no religion' and in the 2016 Census 30.1 percent claimed the same. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Australia is increasing secular, but many people still feel compelled to accede to the ABS request for a 'religion' when they have 'lapsed' long ago, or they take a rebellious option and give contrived answers in 'Other - please specify'.

Assessment Criteria 5

5 The topic can be collected efficiently.

Collected efficiently:

By creating an initial Boolean question, "Does the person have/practice a religion?" no extensive procession will be required as the options will be either Yes or No and collected either by a shaded bubble on a paper form or via a radio box in a webform. This means there is no free form text response that would need to be processed and coded.

Assessment Criteria 6

6 There is likely to be a continuing need for data on this topic in the following Census.

Continuing need:

Religion remains a continuous aspect of many Australian's lives and as such data will continue to be required about the number of people that practice religions or who don't.

Assessment Criteria 7

7 There are no other alternative data sources or solutions that could meet the topic need.

No alternatives:

This data is unavailable through any other source beyond polls that may be conducted via polling agencies. This data has the associated issues of potentially being biased by the commissioning organisation. As such, the Census run by the ABS is the only appropriate place to obtain this data in an unbiased fashion.

Any further comments?

If you would like to tell us anything else about your submission, please comment below.

File upload:

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Further comments: