

Pollspeak Report to Harris Interactive

College Football 2007



Provided by

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Inside this volume of the Pollspeak Report is all of the research and reports involving the Harris Interactive College Football Poll during the course of the 2007 college football season. Section 1 contains an executive summary along with Pollspeak's general recommendations. Section 2 contains all of the supporting information.

Section 1

Executive Summary

If Harris Interactive only takes away one point from this report, it should be this: implement public ballots. Currently the only Harris Interactive College Football Poll ballot made public is the final regular season ballot...this is a BCS requirement. However, there is no BCS restriction that all other ballots can't be public as well. So this is strictly a decision by Harris Interactive.

Certainly, having one public ballot is better than none; however, having any private ballots leads to a perception of hiding something. There is no way for the public (or BCS) to know if the voters are subtly changing the way they vote for the public ballot. Every week's ballot is important to the teams and their fans, which is why all ballots should be public.

A team's poll ranking (particularly its BCS ranking) is not just important at the end of the season. Aside from the obvious implications that polls have on deciding the national championship, there are other benefits of a poll ranking that affect far more teams than the few playing for the big trophy. When a team is ranked in the top 25, it gets more press. The team is listed in every newspaper that covers college sports. The team is listed more often on the ESPN Bottom Line score ticker. Their games get better TV and radio coverage. This all turns into more exposure for the school, which positively affects the team's perception and financials. Equally important (if not more so), the extra exposure has a big affect on recruiting and the attitude of the high school players and coaches. Recruiting is the lifeblood of college sports. So it may not be so important if a team is ranked 17 vs. 18. However, it is VERY important if a team is ranked in the polls at all. Again, public ballots every week are necessary to ensure this process is handled fairly.

Another standard suggestion for all of the polls is to weed out bad voters on an annual basis. Like any organization, you are only as strong as your weakest link. By enacting a policy of reviewing and replacing voters each year, the Harris Interactive College Football Poll will strengthen its reputation. Pollspeak intends to help in this endeavor by providing some tools and information needed to do these reviews. However, to be truly effective, we would need to see public ballots each and every week.

What is a bad voter? There is no easy answer to that. Pollspeak has its definitions as do our readers. Harris Interactive likely has its definitions as well. Those definitions should be published publicly and explained to voters before they are chosen. Right now voting is completely open ended, but some basic rules could help align the voters towards a common goal. Harris Interactive must determine these rules on their own, but some suggestions include:

- Rank the teams based on their performances up to the current week. Do not try to predict the future, which is of course unknown. You will have time to change team rankings each week based on their latest performances. So there is no need to guess in advance.
- Give ample weight to games played on the field. If two teams have similar records, and they have played each other already, generally rank the winner higher. This is a rule of thumb more than a definitive rule because other factors (such as injured players) can also be taken into consideration.
- Do not show unreasonable bias towards any team, including those on your resume. Most of the voters in the Harris Interactive Poll are former players, coaches, administrators or employees of the schools being ranked. Voters should not show favoritism to teams they have been affiliated with.

On that note, the topic of bias must be discussed. The Harris Interactive poll is not as inherently biased as the USA Today Coaches' Poll since all of the voters in the Harris Interactive poll are not currently employed by the universities. However, as past players, coaches, administrators or employees of football playing schools, there is likely some level of allegiance (or rivalry) involved. If Harris Interactive is going to allow voters with obvious school affiliations, they need to ensure that each school and conference has equal representation. Are they currently doing background checks and bias screens on their voters? How are they handling conference affiliations where the number of teams vary? In other words, do conferences with more teams have an advantage by having more representative voters? These are questions that should be addressed publicly and published on their site in the name of full disclosure. Ideally, they should present charts or graphs demonstrating how each team and conference is represented.

A minor demographic issue also worth mentioning is age. This topic is addressed in more detail in Section 2, but many of the voters in the Harris Interactive Poll are retired, and the average age of their voters is the highest of all polls (based on our sample). While age is not necessarily a problem, Harris Interactive might want to look into a greater mix of current and retired voters...as long as the bias balance issues are also addressed.

Another issue discussed in Section 2 is missing ballots. Seven ballots went missing during the course of the 2007 season. Since ballots are private, Pollspeak has no idea whose ballots are missing or why. Neither the USA Today nor AP football polls have a single missing ballot. If Harris Interactive is going to allow ballots to go unfilled, they should publicly explain their system in more detail. How many ballots are allowed to go missing before results are invalidated and what statistical measure are they using to determine this number?

Pollspeak has one final, minor suggestion regarding making the ballots public. The current PDF presentation of the end-of-regular-season ballots is functional, but it would also be good to present the ballots in an HTML format (like the AP) or even spreadsheet format. At the very least, Pollspeak would appreciate receiving the data this way for easier analysis.

Section 2

Unfortunately, due to the Harris Interactive College Football Poll's closed ballots, there is very little supporting information we can provide here, but we have included the lone article we have written based on the lone week of public ballots. Formatting in this document is an approximation of how it originally appeared on the web. To view the original information, see the Football section of Pollspeak: www.pollspeak.com. In contrast, you can see the 40 pages of information we provided to the Associate Press in our *Report to the Associated Press* here:

<http://pollspeak.com/reports/Pollspeak%20Report%20to%20the%20Associated%20Press%20-%20Football%202007.pdf>

A similar amount of data would be provided to Harris Interactive if their ballots were also made public each week. Harris Interactive could use this data to help identify errors and continuously improve their College Football Poll.



The Harris Interactive Poll - What You Don't Know (posted 12/19/07)

We're going to shy away from the typical Bad/Good Voter premise with the Harris Interactive Poll. Most of our readers have gotten comfortable with [Pollstalker](#) by now and can tell for themselves who the most extreme voter is, etc. (Okay, it's [Bobby Aillet](#)). Instead, we'll point out some of the differences between this poll and the others. We can't guarantee that you don't know these things already, but if you do know, please tell us what happened to the missing ballots.

The first, and most obvious, difference is that Harris Interactive is the largest of the polls. With 114 voters, it nearly doubles the Coaches' Poll and dwarfs everything Pollspeak has covered to date:

- AP - 65 voters
- Coaches - 60 voters
- Men's Basketball - 72 voters
- Women's Basketball - 50 voters

However, not so obvious, is that all 114 voters don't have to vote each week. 114 ballots were counted in weeks 15 and 14, but week 13 only had 113 voters. Week 11 only had 112 voters. In all, seven ballots have gone missing during the 11 weeks Harris has been polling this season. The missing votes could be from seven individual voters, or some voters may have neglected to vote multiple times. Since the ballots are secret, we have no idea. We contacted Harris Interactive about this discrepancy. We asked them how many ballots per week are allowed to go missing, and what happens when voters don't turn in ballots? Unfortunately their only response so far has been: "*I would refer you to the December 2 documents that are on the Harris Interactive website (<http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/bcspoll.asp>); these document indicate that all 114 Harris Poll voters submitted their rankings on Sunday, Dec 2nd.*" The Harris Interactive Poll is the only poll that has allowed missing ballots so far. Neither the AP nor Coaches' Poll had a different number of voters on any given week.

Another difference with the Harris Interactive poll is that it is made up of a lot of retired people. There are some current media members, but for the most part the poll is made up of former players, former coaches, former media and former college administrators. With all of these retirees, it makes sense that

the Harris Interactive Poll might have the oldest voters of any poll. Previously we had assumed that the Coaches' Poll might have the oldest voters. So we did some research.

We were able to easily look up the ages of 40 of the 114 voters in the Harris Poll. We would like more data, but this is still a good representative sample. The average age of those 40 voters is 63 years old. The Coaches average age (with 58 of 60 voters checked) was 53 years old. As for the AP, we couldn't find enough for a representative sample, but suffice to say, they are likely the youngest group. Some seem to have just graduated from college, and since the AP Poll is only made up of current media, it makes sense that they would be younger than the retirees. So the average age of Harris voters is a full 10 years older than that of the coaches, and likely much older on average than the AP voters.

Does age really matter? It shouldn't. We are not saying that there should be any type of age limitations placed on voters. Nor are we saying that any one age group votes BETTER than any other age group. However, it is worth noting demographic differences between the polls. If different polls seem to display certain trends, age could be one factor. Perhaps an older generation voter might give more respect to traditional powerhouses than someone from a younger generation. Not that these are definitive examples, but USC was ranked highest (#5) in Harris and #6 in the other two polls. Also, Navy's only two votes came from the Harris Poll. Again, by no means is this proof of any bias by age, but this is a trend well worth noting and tracking over the years.

While on the topic of age, here is a quick call back to the Coaches' Poll. It might just be coincidence, but the two oldest voters in the Coaches Poll (Howard Schnellenberger -- 73 and Bobby Bowden -- 78) also happen to be the two most extreme voters according to [Pollstalker](#).

For what it's worth, the oldest voter we uncovered in the Harris Interactive Poll was [Bill Arnsperger](#), who is 81 and served various coaching stints with Ohio State, Kentucky, Tulane, LSU and the NFL. However, there is a good chance that the Harris Interactive Poll's most extreme voter, [Bobby Aillet](#), is actually older. Unfortunately, our research could not confirm his birth date, but he was captain of the Louisiana Tech football team in 1945, which would likely make him 80 years or older.