

New poll shows voters have strong interest in global affairs

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(Phys.org)—Voters in the pivotal battleground states of Ohio and Florida show strong interest in global security issues, and want to hear the candidates' views on defense, Iran and terrorism in the final presidential debate, according to a [new poll](#) conducted jointly by leading Democratic and Republican pollsters for Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

While the poll confirms [conventional wisdom](#) about the economy as the number one issue in this race, the survey finds that national security is a key issue for many [voters](#) in both [states](#) – almost as decisive a factor as the federal deficit and more important than taxes.

As the candidates head into the critical debate on foreign policy on Monday, Oct. 22, the poll shows voters have mixed views on US global engagement and are split almost down the middle on isolationism. Many are worried about the impact of the Arab Spring on US interests.

The bipartisan survey tested opinion on foreign policy issues among 600 active voters in Ohio and 603 voters in Florida. The survey was conducted for the Belfer Center by two of the nation's leading pollsters, the Mellman Group, a Democratic polling firm, and Hill Research Consultants, a Republican firm, with assistance from GOP consultant Mike Murphy.

Echoing previous surveys, the findings show that many voters lack knowledge of some foreign policy issues – they are more familiar with

Britain's soccer star David Beckham than Prime Minister David Cameron – but they don't lack interest in global issues.

They follow international affairs nearly as closely as they do domestic politics. And nearly twice as many voters want the media to report more on world affairs than less. Large numbers want more teaching on geography in schools, and say they favor more state and federal funding for teaching geography, language and world culture.

The survey—conducted from Oct. 3 (the date of the first debate) to Oct. 7 - found President Obama leading [Mitt Romney](#) in Ohio by 46% to 38% with 14% undecided, while Romney was ahead in Florida, 47% to 43%, with 7% undecided.

What voters want to hear in the final debate:

- The poll shows 48% of surveyed voters in Florida want the United States to pay less attention to problems overseas versus 45% who want an active US abroad, with Republicans and independents there more isolationist than Democrats. In Ohio, 51% prefer an active US to 42% who want less US involvement overseas, with little difference between Democrats and Republicans. Independents in both states were more isolationist.
- Asked about debate subjects, most voters said they are "very interested" in hearing the candidates' views on Iran getting nuclear weapons (72% in Florida, 61% in Ohio) and terrorism (69% Florida, 64% Ohio). Interest was lower on non-security issues such as human rights and the economic situation in Europe.

What voters want to know more about:

- Big pluralities of voters in both states said it is important for students to study geography in elementary and high school (Florida 42% extremely important, 51% very important; Ohio 36% extremely important, 48% very important).
- Asked whether they favored or opposed more federal and state spending to teach geography, foreign languages and cultures, 68% in Florida said yes and 26% no; in Ohio, 63% said yes and 28% no.

What voters worry about and why:

- Voters are pessimistic about the impact of Arab Spring on American interests. In Florida, 27% said it is good while 47% said it is not good and 25% are unsure. The numbers were similar in Ohio – 26% said good, 41% said not good, with 33% unsure.
- Asked to identify reasons to be interested in foreign affairs, most cited that "situations in other countries can draw the United States into wars," and that events abroad can affect the prospects for terrorism in the United States. Far fewer cited moral obligations to promote human rights (12% in Florida, 15% in Ohio), or global health and environment (9% Florida, 16% Ohio).
- More want the media to do more extensive international reporting (34% FL, 37% OH) compared with those who want less world coverage (19% FL, 27% OH)

What voters know (and don't know):

- Those surveyed often know more about foreign celebrities than leaders. More in both states are familiar with basketball star Yao Ming than Chinese heir-apparent Xi Jinping.

- Just 32% in Florida and 24% in Ohio correctly identified Japan as a country without nuclear weapons.
- Voters have connections abroad: 18% in Florida and 12% in Ohio have a family member married to a non-American spouse. Nearly half in both states belong to a religious organization that supports disaster relief or missions abroad.

Provided by Harvard University

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