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# Raise your hand if you care about foreign policy

Romney gaffes notwithstanding, it's all about the economy this year

By [Russ Britt](#), MarketWatch

LOS ANGELES (MarketWatch) — Mitt Romney's current foray overseas may be fraught with gaffes and blunders, but don't expect voters to pay much attention.

Not this year at least.

While there may be some blowback for the Republican in terms of looking presidential as he tries to challenge President Barack Obama, the lion's share of voters are telling candidates that it's the economy, stupid.

Analysts believe Romney is making a perfunctory stab at trying to convince voters he is capable of international relations now, with more than three months before voters go to the polls. Romney will spend much of the rest of the campaign attacking Obama's domestic credentials as the economy continues to struggle.

"It's something that challengers always do," said Stuart Rothenberg, publisher of the political newsletter, the Rothenberg Political Report. "Look, you have to demonstrate some minimal familiarity with international conditions and international concerns with the role of the U.S. in foreign policy. Beyond that, it's all icing on the cake."

But this year more than ever, foreign policy is taking a back seat to not only the economy, but just about anything else.

In several polls taken in the spring, foreign policy didn't even show up as a category when voters were asked what the most important issues were facing the country today. Voters had to be asked about it.

According to the web site PollingReport.com, a survey by CNN and ORC International conducted in late May asked voters what were the most important issues facing the country today. In that poll, adults were given a list of categories that included "terrorism" and "Afghanistan."

Terrorism was listed as a top priority by 5% of respondents, with Afghanistan getting 3%. The economy came in at number one by far, with 52% of respondents.

That has generally the case in any similar survey conducted this year, provided the issue of foreign policy was raised by pollsters. But when respondents are simply asked what is the most important issue of the election year, foreign policy issues don't get a mention.

It's unclear where it came into play in two CBS/ New York Times polls when that open-ended question was asked, as well as an ABC News/Washington Post poll. Presumably, it came under what was described as "other." But issues such as health care, the budget deficit, partisan politics, education and taxes are the ones that got a specific mention from respondents right after the economy.

"Foreign policy in this race is not a terribly salient issue," said Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. In fact, Logan noted late last week when anemic GDP numbers were released from the Commerce Department, Romney would have been better off in the states railing against Obama rather than overseas.

It's early enough in the campaign that missing out on a few jabs at the administration won't cost Romney too much, but he can't keep concentrating on foreign policy, Logan says.

"He'll be throwing away the best opportunity he has," he said. Romney's recent speech attacking Obama's foreign credentials before the Veterans of Foreign Wars didn't do much to help him either.

"For policy wonks like me, it was a bit of a snoozer" that was short on specifics, Logan said. Romney should be well served by sticking to that strategy, which Logan called a "high level of abstraction."

But continuing to press on foreign policy issues would play into Obama's hands, since his credentials are stronger on that topic than they are on the economy, analysts say. Hostilities in Iraq were ended under his watch and the war in Afghanistan is winding down.

And of course, Obama managed to eliminate al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics.

"Osama bin Laden, Osama bin Laden, Osama bin Laden may be constant in some of the Obama ads," he said.

Further, Romney didn't do well in his first time at bat, says Sabato.

"It was embarrassing. He made six blunders in one day," Sabato said, before committing other gaffes in Israel and Poland. But all those are likely to be forgotten soon, he added.

"I think it's to ensure his own supporters that he's capable of stepping out on the world stage," Sabato said. "Romney is inherently cautious, and people sense that."

Even if neither candidate mentions foreign policy again, the subject still will come up at least one more time at the final presidential debate on Oct. 22. Foreign policy is the focus of that last of three standoffs between Obama and Romney.

Does that benefit Obama to have foreign policy be the last topic before voters head to polls two weeks later on Nov. 6? Sabato says no.

"The public will have gone through 10 other issues by then," Sabato said. "The media will have gone through 50."