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MINNPOST

Monday's debate: Watch for what Romney says about Europe

By [Nick Hayes](#) | 10/19/12



REUTERS/Jason Reed

Mitt Romney speaking to the press following his meeting with Prime Minister David Cameron outside 10 Downing Street in July.

There's not a binder of Europeans ready to support Gov. Mitt Romney.

If residents of the European Union could vote today in the U.S. presidential election, 75 percent would vote for President Obama and 8 percent for Romney. He doesn't care. Polls indicate that most of you reading this don't care.

Let me, first of all, admit that I am a bit Eurocentric and that I speak some French (You will see the point below) and, secondly, suggest why we should care.

In mid-September, [a poll by Transatlantic Trends](#) of the German Marshall Fund found that 82 percent of Europeans have a favorable opinion of Obama while 23 percent hold a favorable opinion of Romney. In the wake of the first presidential debates in early October, Obama's support in France was

89 percent and in Germany, 87 percent.

Although the October poll had Obama down 3 points in France from his September approval rating, Romney cannot argue that momentum is on his side. The slight slippage in Obama's favorability rating in Europe has come from European objections to his increased use of drone strikes, one aspect of Obama's strategy that Romney's neocon supporters at least secretly admire.



Romney has gotten his message across to Russia. Recent **public opinion polls in Russia**, our “No. 1 geopolitical enemy,” show 42 percent of the country favoring a victory for Obama, with 4 percent of Russians favor Romney.

Our last presidential debate comes Monday and will focus on foreign policy. On policy toward Europe, watch for three things. First, Romney won't show off his French. Second, he will promise a “missile shield” for Poland and the Czech Republic where public opinion polls show majorities are clearly against the system. Lastly, he will accuse Obama of leading us down the

path of Greece or Spain.

A knack for offending Europeans

The European polls confirm that at least one aspect of the Romney campaign is working well.

Think back to the summer and Romney's gaffe-prone trip to Britain, Israel, and Poland. Romney has a knack for offending Europeans. To re-phrase one of his earlier malapropisms, Romney is “severely” neocon when it comes to Europe.

It manifests itself in peculiar ways. For starters, Romney has hypocritically embraced the new right's contempt for speaking French. President George W. Bush set this standard. In the 2004 campaign, “W” seized upon Sen. John Kerry's ability to speak fluent French to call him a Francophile. “W” sneered that Kerry even “looks French.”

Like many references to his past, Romney has a problem here. A legacy from his youthful days as a Mormon missionary in France, Romney speaks excellent French. YouTube has preserved **Romney's 2002 video** welcome in French to the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. His French is excellent and, ah well, he does look a bit French. Last January, Newt Gingrich put out attack ads criticizing Romney for speaking French, “just like John Kerry.”

In the course of the Republican primary battles, Romney's French went the way of his record on pro-choice issues and health care in Massachusetts and was erased from the campaign's version of his

biography.

Speaking French was not always a liability in U.S. presidential politics. Others, who actually made it to the White House, showed off a far weaker command of French. Theodore Roosevelt flaunted his French, which some complained carried a heavy German accent.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt refused a translator and spoke to France's General Charles de Gaulle in French. Decades later, in his memoirs, de Gaulle wrote that he never understood a word FDR said. One of the charms of the American Camelot was that its first lady spoke French so well that she could even charm old Gen. de Gaulle.

Obama does not claim to speak any French other than "merci beaucoup." On camera in France, he once tripped up and was unable to pronounce the "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*" on his teleprompter. He can, however, claim as one of his greatest achievements in foreign policy that his administration stemmed the tide and turned back the rising anti-Americanism that rose with the Bush administration and peaked with the war in Iraq.

His popularity in Europe has remained fairly consistent and strong since his historic 2008 trip to Berlin. Obama was therefore able to translate this better image of the U.S. in Europe into NATO's participation in the war in Afghanistan, the intervention in Libya and the tougher sanctions against Iran.

However, the [Pew Global Attitudes Project](#) confirms that his Cairo speech in 2009 did not have the effect in the Muslim world that his 2008 speech in Berlin had on European opinion. Anti-Americanism continued to rise and exploded into the riots that shook the Muslim world this fall.

European unpopularity may help at home

Romney's not fretting about how he polls in Europe. His unpopularity in Europe probably has given a boost to his often-lagging popularity among neocons and the new right who delight in trashing the "EuroWeenies."

Besides, foreign policy will not decide this election. Last May, a [Washington Post-ABC News Poll](#) revealed that only 1 percent of Americans viewed foreign policy as their most important issue in the campaign.

It's not about the election. It's about how the next administration would govern. As the last Republican administration learned, foreign policy issues unexpectedly and often define a presidency.

[A recent poll by the Guardian](#) shows that a Romney victory on Nov. 6 would bring anti-American opinion in Europe back to its pre-Obama, Bush-era levels. Romney appears to want a new Cold War that substitutes the Muslim world for the Russians but seems to have forgotten the European allies who were essential to our victory in the original Cold War.

In any case, in foreign policy, Romney needs to understand that you can't bring a reluctant ally along by tying it to the top of your car.

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