

People all over the world don't have a right to vote in the US, but remain keenly interested in the country's elections – because what the new president might do or not do often affects their countries and even their daily lives. While no one would suggest granting foreigners the right to influence the US election, that should not prevent Americans from hearing foreign views and concerns in a global town-hall meeting, argues Jeffrey Garten, professor of international trade and finance with Yale University. The Republican presumptive nominee John McCain urged Barack Obama, the Democratic presumptive nominee, to agree to a series of 10 town-hall meetings before the November 4 election. The candidates have not come to terms about when, where or how to debate – but one meeting between the candidates should explore the tough international issues. For at least one debate, Garten proposes that the candidates organize a televised town-hall meeting and invite questions from foreign journalists and remote participants. In this essay, Garten offers a sampling of questions, including those that address the US reversal on free trade, China's rise and ineffective drug policies in Latin America. – YaleGlobal

Time for a Global Town-Hall Meeting?

US voters could best assess the presidential candidates, under the fire of foreign questions

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NEW HAVEN: Recently the Pew Global Attitudes Project released another survey in its series on foreign attitudes about the US. Despite slight improvement in its image, the United States is still seen by people in most countries in a highly unfavorable light.

But the fact remains that such polls are too vague for most US citizens, and there is a better way to get a handle on outsiders' perspective. US Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain challenged his Democratic rival, Senator Barack Obama, to participate in a series of 10 town-hall debates before the November 4 election. Although Obama did not agree on the details, Americans would benefit from at least a few specific debates. And if the US role in an ever-globalizing world is to be fully aired, one of the meetings should feature questions from Europe, Asia, Latin America and elsewhere. In other words, there should be a global-town hall meeting.



Global town hall: US presidential candidates as well as the American electorate may benefit from hearing the concerns of world citizens. [Enlarge image](#)

This idea first struck me during spring 2004 when I hosted the mayor of Beijing during a visit to Yale University. At that time he suggested to a group of faculty that the world had so much at stake in the election between George Bush and John Kerry that 10 percent of the votes should be reserved for an international audience. It was a startling thought from a very nationalistic Chinese official who said that although China didn't want to be led by the US, the world in which the Middle Kingdom operates would be shaped in great part by the next US president.

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Of course, the mayor knew there is no chance that anyone but US citizens would cast votes, but he went on to explain that Americans should know what's on the mind of the 95 percent of the world's population that lives outside the US, all greatly affected by what the country does or fails to do.

Right now, the candidates raise few global issues in anything other than a pure American context. And even the subjects that do come up – whether and when we should leave Iraq or whether we should talk to adversaries like Iran – represent a sliver of the full dimension of US global involvements.

In making judgments about the candidates, Americans would be much better informed if they knew more about the wide range of issues that the rest of the world considers important insofar as the US can have an influence on them. Equally critical, if Americans could watch the two candidates respond to the concerns of a broader international audience, the voters could make a finer

judgment about each nominee's possible approach to an array of international challenges, largely overlooked during the heat of short-term electoral politics.

A question from abroad might go as follows: "For decades the US has preached the doctrine of free commerce across borders and benefited enormously from it. Washington always loudly asserted that the job dislocations that come with such globalization should be addressed with domestic policies that do not impede the free movement of goods and money. Yet today, the US is pulling back from its traditional global engagement by balking at new trade deals, pushing away foreign investment and slowing immigration, and could even cause the world to follow this protectionist direction in its own self-defense. What's your view on these trends and your plans to deal with them?"

If candidates responded to the concerns of an international audience, Americans could judge each nominee's approach to an array of international challenges.

Another general question could be: "At a time when the world is deeply concerned with economic and social issues, such as economic growth, education and poverty, the US has militarized its global engagement, using its armed forces as the leading edge of its foreign policy and a major instrument in rebuilding failed states. Would this be your policy, and if not, what would you do to change the emphasis?"

Someone outside the US might well ask the candidates what the increased interdependence with the rest of the world means for US policy when it comes to the country's sovereignty or strategy in international institutions. They could ask for a few examples including US financial policy and its intentions with respect to climate change.

From Asia, we might expect, "Ten years ago, the US was an overwhelming influence in the region, politically, economically and culturally, but today China has at least equal status and gaining more ground fast. Are you comfortable with this reversal and, if not, what are your plans to address America's decline in the world's most vibrant region?"

From Latin America, we could hear something like this: "After 20 years of a war on drugs that has made no appreciable dent on coca or cocaine production, nor the growth of powerful and massively armed criminal syndicates, what are you going to do to reduce demand for illegal narcotics in the US and otherwise develop a more effective anti-drug strategy for the Americas?"

A citizen from the Middle East might ask, “We are neither democratic nor economically developed, but eventually we’d like to be both. But rather than follow the American obsession with free elections, for which we are not remotely ready, we would like to follow the paths of South Korea, Taiwan and now China and achieve steady growth that is broadly spread before turning to true democratic political reforms. What’s wrong with that?”

Someone outside the US might ask the candidates what increased interdependence with the rest of the world means for US policy.

A possibility from Europe: “America is obsessed with challenges from the Middle East and China, but without its European partners, the US alone has little leverage in either arena, let alone on other pressing questions like climate change, currency stability or Russia’s worst authoritarian instincts. How do you envision the US-European relationship at a time when so many of the links that used to exist during the Cold War seem to have disappeared?”

Because neither of the two candidates has covered these kinds of issues in any depth, Americans would likely be fascinated with the questions and riveted by the answers. For two men who aspire to occupy the world’s most important leadership position, surely it’s time for this discussion.

Logistically, representatives of a few global news organizations, such as CNN, the BBC, Xinhua and Al Jazeera could constitute the panel posing questions, after culling them from audiences around the world. An alternative would be for editors from some of the world’s great newspapers to constitute the panel. People abroad could participate directly via YouTube as well. The town meeting could be held in an international city such as London or Singapore, just to drive home the point that the US has a global vision more than just the sum of American views.

The US could still be the pivotal leader in shaping the global environment for itself and for others. However, being a leader is impossible without followers.

You don’t have to believe that America is the dominant global powerhouse that it was just a few decades ago to expect that it could still be the pivotal leader in shaping the global environment for itself and for others. However, being a leader is impossible without followers, and a leader can’t have followers without understanding what they’re thinking and what they require in order to cooperate. Americans need to know which of the candidates better recognizes this reality.

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