

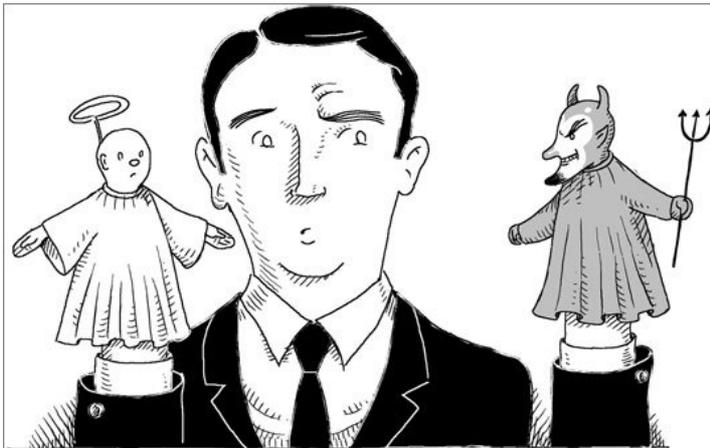
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UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

# When left is right

Surprising insights from the social sciences



(Wesley Bedrosian for The Boston Globe)

By Kevin Lewis  
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Right is right, left is wrong. Because most people are righthanded, this bias has become customary. Thus, according to a recent paper, “the Latin words for right and left, dexter and sinister, form the roots of English words meaning skillful and evil, respectively,” and “according to Islamic doctrine, the left hand should only be used for dirty jobs, whereas the right hand is used for eating,” and “the left foot is used for stepping into the bathroom, and the right foot for entering the mosque.” But what do lefthanders think? The authors of the paper compared the gestures made by the presidential candidates in the final debates of the 2004 and 2008 elections to the phrases that were spoken at the same time. John McCain and Barack Obama, who are both lefthanded, preferred their left hands for positive comments and their right hands for negative comments, while the pattern was reversed for George W. Bush and John Kerry, who are both righthanded.

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Casasanto, D. & Jasmin, K., “Good and Bad in the Hands of Politicians: Spontaneous Gestures during Positive and Negative Speech,” *PLoS ONE* (July 2010).

### Couples therapy

Some marriages are healthier than others, both figuratively and literally. A team of researchers observed the social interactions of several dozen married couples. The researchers also collected blood samples from everyone and created small blisters on each person’s forearm, and then monitored the healing process. The level of two hormones (oxytocin and vasopressin) in a person’s blood was associated with both the quality of that person’s marital communication and how quickly that person’s wound healed. Those with higher levels of these hormones were more positive and less negative with their partner and exhibited faster wound healing.

Gouin, J. et al., “Marital Behavior, Oxytocin, Vasopressin, and Wound Healing,” *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (August 2010).

### Teen sex and TV

As long as humans have communicated, they have probably debated the question of whether kids are influenced by lurid content. The issue is a

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