

**Host: Robert Frederick**

When presented with two choices, one on the left and one on the right, do you happen to know how often you choose the one on the right versus the one on the left?

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

Righties want to choose the person or product on the right; lefties, on average, the person or product on the left.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

On this episode of The Conjectural — a story about invisible influences.

Suppose you're at the store. You need to buy some paper towels. You find the shelf where they're located and there are just two options in front of you. One is on the right. One is on the left.

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

Lots of times when we are standing in the supermarket shelves, or even in the voting booth, we have a measure of ambivalence or lack of complete knowledge and we're going with our gut.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

That's Daniel Casasanto, a psychology researcher at The University of Chicago.

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

When we do that, factors like how we use our hands can influence our decisions. How does this work? Well, the mechanism is that we — as handed creatures — behave more dexterously and therefore experience more motor fluency with one hand, and therefore on one side of the body, compared to the other. We have a fluent side and a clumsy side of space because of our handedness.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

And that fluency makes a difference in our choices in some circumstances. So, you're at the store, wait, let's suppose it's in France, or Japan — pick some country where you don't know the language at all. Okay, you find the shelf where there are the two types of paper towels to choose from. There's no one to ask which one is better, you wouldn't understand them anyway; both shelves are fully stocked so you can't tell which one is more popular with the locals, and you can't read the package, not one bit. You can't feel or smell them, either. But you can see through the clear plastic that they're wrapped in that they are, in fact, paper towels, and you need to buy some. So which do you choose — the one on the left or the one on the right — when, like Casasanto says,

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

we have a measure of ambivalence or lack of complete knowledge and we're going with our gut.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Now, maybe it's just me, and yes, I'm the one who started a show called *The Conjectural*, but I think life is full of decisions like these. No, not because of ambivalence, at least not for me, but because it's pretty much impossible to have complete knowledge about anything.

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

And we're going with our gut.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Of course, Casasanto didn't do his research with subjects choosing paper towels in Japanese supermarkets. I just made that up to help you imagine feeling really ambivalent about a choice. Rather, it was through controlled experiments in the lab that his team showed that your handedness is influencing you.

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

We know that this is the causal factor because we manipulate this in the lab. We bring righties into the lab and they start out thinking the right side is good. We put a big bulky ski glove on their hand for about 12 minutes and make them do fine motor tasks.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Which, in one case, meant having people place pairs of dominoes — over and over as fast as possible, with one domino in each hand at a time — placing the dominoes to stand up on top of a pattern on a table. Now, quickly standing up dominoes in a pattern with both hands simultaneously is kind of hard to do even without a big bulky ski glove on your dominant hand. And doing it for 12 minutes straight? That's frustrating. Accidentally knock them down and you have to pick them back up, still with the bulky ski glove on your hand.

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

When we take that off, they've experienced the reversed motor asymmetry...

**Host: Robert Frederick**

because the right-handed people in the experiment experienced comparatively better left-handedness

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

...and suddenly they think the left side is good like natural lefties.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

And in the experiment with the dominoes, 63% of the right-handed participants — after 12 minutes of experiencing comparatively better left-handedness — gave preference in a choice to things on their left side. How's that compare with right-handed people who did the same experiment with the glove on their left hand, so that their right hand was and remained the most skillful at setting up the dominoes? 77% of them gave a preference to things on their right side. So this invisible influence is strong enough — after only 12 minutes of fumbling around with dominoes because of a big bulky ski glove, to switch righties into behaving like lefties. Okay, so what about people who use both hands, say, they throw a ball better left-handed, but are better at using chopsticks right-handed?

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

We talk about handedness as being a righty or a lefty. In fact, it's a continuum and we're all somewhere along that continuum. People who are in the middle should show these biases less strongly.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Don't want to be invisibly influenced this way at all?

**Speaker: Daniel Casasanto**

Righties want to choose the person or product on the right; lefties, on average, the person or product on the left.

**Host: Robert Frederick**

Remember, the only reason these biases can happen, the only time you're susceptible to this particular invisible influence, is when you're ambivalent about your choices, or don't know much about them, and so you go with your gut. That's when other people can, will, and probably do take advantage of these invisible influences—to sell you more of their products or perhaps even to help their candidate win an election. So to keep from being invisibly influenced in this way, the solution is simple: get interested and involved, and learn as much as you can about your choices before making a decision.

You've been listening to The Conjectural, a show that's running an experiment. The data for this experiment? Your feedback to [TheConjectural.com](http://TheConjectural.com), where you can also give the support that makes this show happen, download a transcript, and subscribe. Support for this episode comes from listeners like you and from *American Scientist* magazine, published by Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society. I'm Robert Frederick. Follow me on Twitter [@TheConjectural](https://twitter.com/TheConjectural). Until next time!