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Do Obama's small biceps explain his liberal politics?

By Robin Abcarian

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Here's a scientific news flash about our recent presidential election: You could assume that President Obama was more kindly disposed to redistribution of wealth than Mitt Romney just by looking at them.

Not because Obama is African American and Romney is white. Not because Romney is a Republican and Obama is a Democrat.

You could have made the assumption, according to researchers at Denmark's Aarhus University, Australia's Griffith University and UC Santa Barbara, just by looking at their biceps.

Evolutionarily speaking, the president's relatively slender upper body is a bright, flashing indicator of inferior physical strength. And, the researchers found, [men with smaller biceps](#) tend to be less self-interested than men with larger biceps.



"When you spread the wealth around, it's good for everybody," then-candidate Obama told plumber Samuel "Joe" Wurzelbacher in their fateful 2008 [encounter in Ohio](#).

"That's a pretty socialist comment," the beefy plumber [later huffed](#).

To test the association between upper-body strength and political ideology, the researchers focused on what they called "a key resource conflict in modern politics: the redistribution of income and wealth."

"Men with upper body strength," they wrote, "feel more entitled to advantageous outcomes." (Schwarzenegger, anyone?)

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“You can predict which individual will get contested resources if you look at who values or needs the resources the most, but also, who has the higher fighting ability,” explained UC Santa Barbara evolutionary psychologist Daniel Sznycer, 37, a co-author of the study, which appeared this week in the journal *Psychological Science*. “If you look at the range of animals — from invertebrates to vertebrates to primates and human animals — you see that stronger, more weaponized animals are more likely to win a contest.”

(“Weaponized” means canine teeth, horns, fangs, or in the case of Mitt Romney, I guess, his checkbook.)

The researchers measured their subjects’ biceps and asked them to respond to a series of yes-or-no statements, such as “Money should be taken from the rich and given to the poor,” “The wealthy should give more money to those who are worse off,” and “The government should intervene economically to redistribute wealth from those who have more resources to those who have less resources.”

Sznycer said it was impossible to predict a subject’s political orientation merely based on indices like income and assets. “Wealthy people don’t necessarily vote conservative and poor people don’t necessarily vote liberal,” he said.

But when socioeconomic status was combined with the bicep measurement, it became much easier to predict where someone stood on the issue of wealth redistribution. Ergo, big biceps + higher status = opposition to spreading the wealth around. Smaller biceps + low status = support for redistribution.

So where does that leave a poor man with bulging arms?

In favor of redistribution, Sznycer said. “If you are poor, greater strength is associated with greater support for redistribution. You could think of labor unions — there is strength in numbers — and that’s where strength would play out in the domain of low resources.”

The study found no similar relationship for women between strength and self-interest. “Women can certainly be competitive, but they use more indirect forms of aggression,” said Sznycer. “The assertion of the self-interest among women is driven by physical attractiveness more than physical strength.”

Hmmm. The evolutionary argument for eyelash-batting. Just as I feared.

The research suggests that on some level the brain is still organized by what Sznycer called “ancestral challenges” — the struggle for resources a time when our ancestors lived in “small-scale social ecologies.”

Today, of course, we live in a time when economic policies are shaped by the popular vote, not by brute strength.

Yet, still, in the back of our minds, there is some atavistic voice always whispering that no matter how far we’ve come, the strong guys still get most of the good stuff.

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