

# Too many candidates spoil the stew

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This election year has produced 17 Republican presidential candidates, which on its surface may appear to give the party a competitive advantage. Evolution, however, disagrees.

A new study by Michigan State University researcher Arend Hintze and appearing in the current issue of *Scientific Reports*, says the delicate balance of some, but not too much, [competition](#) optimally drives the evolution of decision-making strategies.

"Competition has a unique relationship with our decision-making strategies as humans," said Hintze, an assistant professor at MSU. "Modest competition is a strong driver of good decision-making, but over-competition won't lead to the best outcome."

Hintze found that strong competition, like that of the presidential candidate field, may cause humans to evolve quick decision strategies that sacrifice accuracy in order to be faster to the punch than competitors. Weaker competition, however, causes humans to evolve decision strategies to become more thoughtful and to do more research when seeking answers.

"More competition necessitates quicker, less accurate decisions," he said. "To prevent competitors from choosing first, we may rely on minimal information to make a decision. The downside of this strategy is the risk of ending up with the inferior option."

Away from the presidential spotlight, [hermit crabs](#) are constantly using

this evolutionary skill. As they grow, they need new, larger shells. In areas with a small crab population, [crabs](#) will inspect new shells carefully, even trying them on before committing to a new home.

More crabs mean more competition. In crowded areas, crabs come across new shells and make snap decisions to wear them. Some crabs even cling to others before they shed their shells to lay claim to them. Hintze found that this excessive competition drives the evolution of split-second decision-making, even if that decision is not the most beneficial.

In the race for the presidency, this might be seen in quick-response decisions or reactions as candidates fight for media coverage and relevancy. The strong competition might push candidates to comment on a topic or issue without proper planning because they are driven to mention it before their competitors. This drive is the adaptive result of evolution, according to Hintze.

"Making quick decisions in light of competition is not irrational," he said. "It's the sign of an evolved organism to know when to rely on a hunch, even though the hunch might not be the best choice."

Thus, in order to get the best possible candidate for the presidential election, and to focus more on the topics that matter, the candidates should compete with one another less for the best results, he added.

**More information:** The Janus face of Darwinian competition, *Scientific Reports* 5, Article number: 13662 (2015) [DOI: 10.1038/srep13662](#)

Provided by Michigan State University

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