Suppose $a$ and $b$ are single-digit positive integers chosen independently and at random. What is the probability that the point $(a, b)$ lies above the parabola $y = ax^2 - bx$?

**QUICK STATS:**

**MAA AMC GRADE LEVEL**
This question is appropriate for the upper high-school grade levels.

**MATHEMATICAL TOPICS**
Graphs of Functions; Probability

**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**
- A-REI.D Represent and solve equations and inequalities graphically.
- S-CP.B Use the rules of probability to compute probabilities of compound events in a uniform probability model

**MATHEMATICAL PRACTICE STANDARDS**
- MP1 Make sense of problems and persevere in solving them.
- MP2 Reason abstractly and quantitatively.
- MP3 Construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others.
- MP7 Look for and make use of structure.

**PROBLEM SOLVING STRATEGY**

**ESSAY 7:** PERSEVERANCE IS KEY

**SOURCE:** This is question #14 from the 2011 MAA AMC 12A Competition.
THE PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCESS:

The best, and most appropriate, first step is always ...

**STEP 1:** Read the question, have an emotional reaction to it, take a deep breath, and then reread the question.

This feels like a strange question. Just make sure I understand it: We pick a number \( a \) at random, which could be 1, 2, 3, ..., 9, another single-digit number \( b \) from the same set, use them to draw a parabola:

\[
y = ax^2 - bx
\]

(so we get something like \( y = 3x^2 - 9x \), or \( y = x^2 - 4x \), always upward-facing U-shapes), and we want the point \((a, b)\) in the picture to be above the curve.

Is \((3, 9)\) above \( y = 3x^2 - 9x \)?
Is \((1, 4)\) above \( y = x^2 - 4x \)?

**How can I tell?**

We could graph all the possibilities and check by hand.

![Graph](image)

There are nine possible values for \( a \) and nine for \( b \). That’s only 81 pictures to draw and check. (Yeesh!)

Algebraically, what does it mean for the point \((a, b)\) to be above the curve? We need \( b \) to be larger than the \( y \)-coordinate of the point on the curve with the same \( x \)-coordinate as \((a, b)\).

This is weird. The \( y \)-coordinate for \( y = ax^2 - bx \) with the matching \( x \)-coordinate \( x = a \) is \( y = a \cdot a^2 - ba \). (Too many \( a \)s and \( b \)s!)

So we want: \( b > a^3 - ab \). What are the chances of this happening?

Well, perhaps we can go through cases for this.

If \( a = 1 \), then we need \( b > 1 - b \), that is, \( 2b > 1 \) or \( b > 1/2 \). Any of the nine values 1, 2, 3, ..., 9 for \( b \) work.

If \( a = 2 \), then we need \( b > 8 - 2b \), that is, \( b > 8/3 \). Here \( b = 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 \) work, seven possibilities.

If \( a = 3 \), then we need \( b > 27 - 3b \), that is, \( b > 6 - 3/4 \).

There are three values for \( b \) that work.

If \( a = 4 \), then we need \( b > 64 - 4b \), that is, \( b > 12 - 4/5 \).

None work.

I suspect the numbers just keep getting bigger and the nine plus seven plus three options we have seen are it. To check, let’s solve for \( b \) in general:

\[
\begin{aligned}
\frac{b}{a+1} &< \frac{a^3}{a+1} \\
(a+1)b &> a^3 \\
& \frac{b}{a+1} > \frac{a^3}{a+1}
\end{aligned}
\]

Hmm. Is this always bigger than 9 when \( a \) is bigger than 4? For \( a = 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 \) we get \( \frac{a^3}{a+1} \) equal to \( \frac{125}{6}, \frac{216}{7}, \frac{343}{8}, \frac{512}{9}, \frac{729}{10} \), in turn, and each numerator is more than ten times the denominator.

Okay, we have 9 + 7 + 3 = 19 pairs \((a, b)\) that work, out of 81 possible pairs. The probability we seek is thus \( \frac{19}{81} \).

**Extension:** Edna wrote \( \frac{a^3}{a+1} = \frac{a^3 + a^2 - a^2}{a+1} = a^2 - \frac{a^2}{a+1} \) and then \( \frac{a^2}{a+1} = \frac{a^2 + a - a}{a+1} = a - \frac{a}{a+1} \). She proved that \( \frac{a^3}{a+1} \) is larger than \((a - 1)^2\) for all positive integers. How? Is this true for negative integers too? For all real numbers?

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