Real World Graduation: Question 8
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Question 8

A reputable pollster takes an opinion poll of 1000 people. The poll consists of only one question, and it is about the probable success of a proposed government policy. None of the respondents were familiar with the policy, but were familiar with the issue that the policy addressed. The respondents of the poll are asked to give their opinion as one of the following choices. The percent of the respondents that gave each answer is indicated in parentheses. The choices were:
a) Virtually no chance of success (3%);
b) Small chance of success (31%);
c) Good chance of success (64%); and
d) Virtually guaranteed success (2%).

The reputable pollster calculates that his margin of error is about 4%. How accurate is the poll as an indicator of how successful the policy will be if it is enacted?
a)   The probability of success is 96% (100% - 4%), because the answers have to be corrected for the pollster's estimated error.
b)   The policy will be 64% successful because that choice got the highest percentage.
c)   It has a good chance of succeeding because that choice got the highest percentage, but is not necessarily 64% probable.
d)   The probability of success is always 50-50 no matter what the poll says.
e)   The policy will never be enacted because the people who responded to the poll did not achieve the required two-thirds (66%) majority in their opinion.

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Edward D. Duvall is the author of The Federalist Companion: A Guide to Understanding *The Federalist Papers* and *Can You Afford That Student Loan*.

Answer to Question 8

This is a trick question.   None of the answers are correct.

The polling scenario in the question is typical: it asks the people to respond to a question they do not understand. Therefore, the answers are all irrelevant, and the margin of error is infinite. Polls are often used this way to play into people's desire to give their opinion. They delude themselves into believing that their answer matters. Of course, their answer does not matter, because the success of the policy will be whatever it is. But the results of such a meaningless poll can be used by clever politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations to con the public into believing a majority of people have confidence in a particular policy, therefore, it is probably a good policy to pursue. It also works the other way: if the people who answer the poll do not have confidence in a certain policy (never mind they do not understand it), those who are opposed to the policy will use the poll results as ammunition against it. A pollster is considered reputable if he faithfully tabulates the answers he has received, and counts them accurately. No matter how reputable the pollster is, polls are usually fixed in one of many underhanded ways. This example is only one of them.

The thing to remember from this is that poll results are relevant only if the respondents understand the effects of a policy and the results indicate only its popularity, not its chances for success, or its accuracy. There was a time when nearly everyone believed the earth was flat. Had a poll been taken then, and people asked if sailors would fall off the earth, a high percentage would have agreed with the pollster's choice that they would. There was a time when nearly everyone believed that supersonic flight was impossible. Had a poll been taken then, most people would have agreed with the pollster's suggestion that aircraft approaching the speed of sound would disintegrate or disappear. There are people now who believe the earth is going to be destroyed because people use gasoline in their cars. Current polls indicate that most people believe the earth is going to be destroyed because of too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere resulting from the burning of fossil fuels such as gasoline.

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