The Mathematics of Machine Learning 2026

Lecture 7

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Outline

Refresher and Motivation

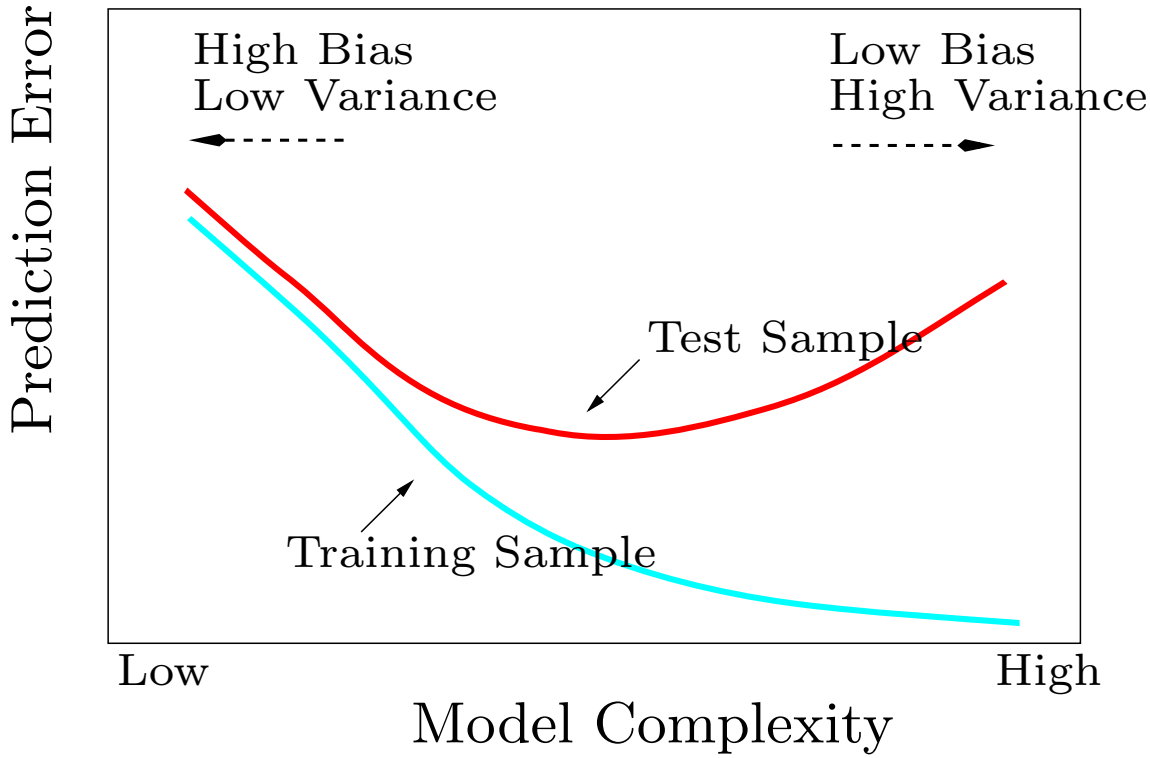
1. Bagging vs Boosting

Boosting

2. Weak Learners
3. AdaBoost
4. Forward Stagewise Additive Modeling
5. AdaBoost as FSAM
6. Theoretical Guarantee
7. Discussion: Exponential Loss

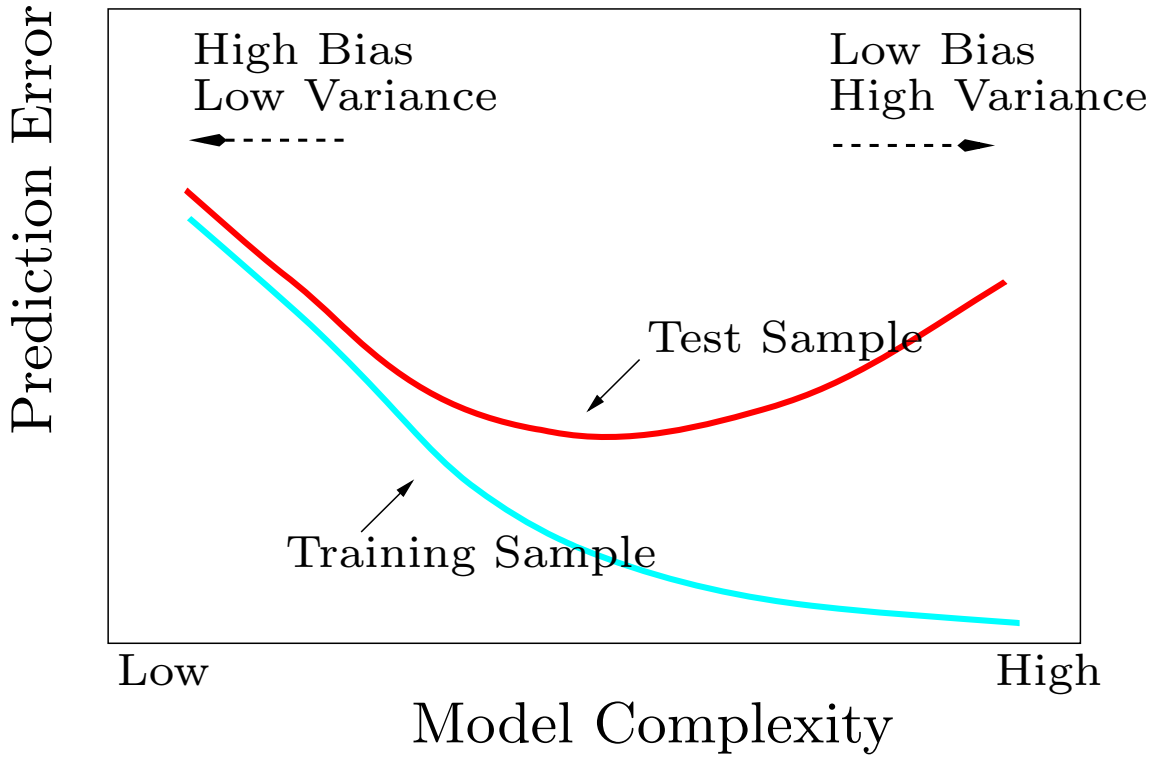
Q&A Session

Bagging vs Boosting



- **Larger model $\mathcal{F}$:** best $f \in \mathcal{F}$ better approximation f_B (small bias), but more difficult to estimate (high variance)
- **Smaller model $\mathcal{F}$:** best $f \in \mathcal{F}$ worse approximation of f_B (large bias), but easier to estimate (small variance)

Bagging vs Boosting



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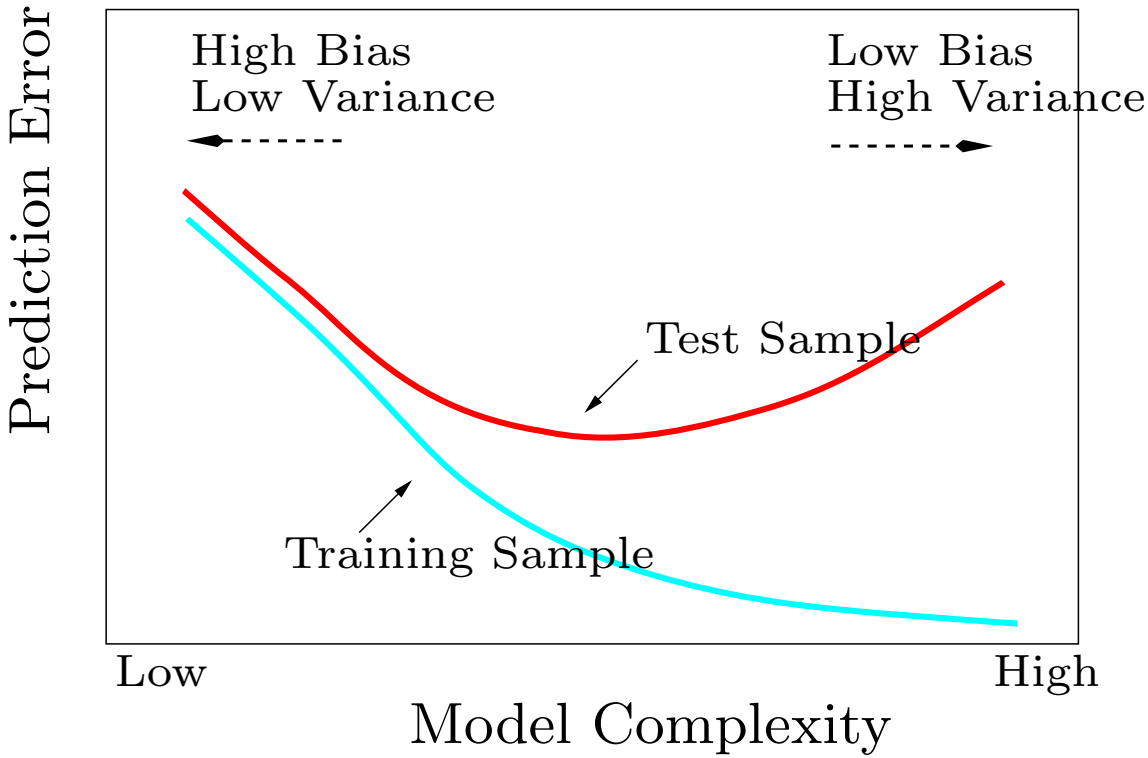

Two ways to make an estimator better:

- **Bagging:** Improve a low bias, high-variance estimator (e.g. unpruned decision tree)
- **Boosting:** Improve a high bias, low-variance estimator

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algorithm that learns a **binary classifier**
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Examples:

- E.g. if weak learner uses ERM over $\mathcal{F}_{\text{small}}$:

$$\min_{G \in \mathcal{F}_{\text{small}}} \sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i L_{0/1}(f^*(X_i), G(X_i)) \leq \frac{1}{2} - \epsilon$$

  for any weights $w_i \geq 0$ such that $\sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i = 1$.
- E.g. $\mathcal{F}_{\text{small}}$ = decision stumps = decision trees with only one binary decision

How can we improve weak learners?

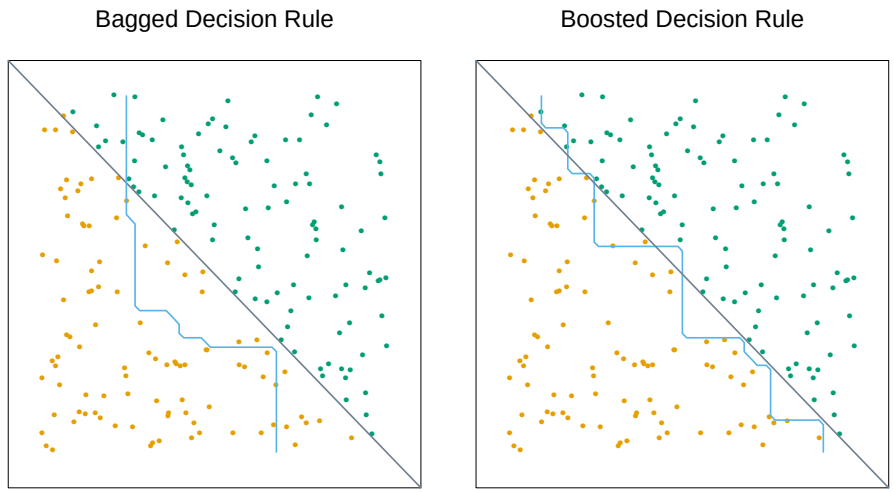

FIGURE 8.12. *Data with two features and two classes, separated by a linear boundary. (Left panel:) Decision boundary estimated from bagging the decision rule from a single split, axis-oriented classifier. (Right panel:) Decision boundary from boosting the decision rule of the same classifier. The test error rates are* 0.166, *and* 0.065, *respectively. Boosting is described in Chapter 10.*

Boosting High-level Approach

$$\begin{pmatrix} Y_1 \\ X_1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad \begin{pmatrix} Y_2 \\ X_2 \end{pmatrix}, \quad \ldots, \quad \begin{pmatrix} Y_N \\ X_N \end{pmatrix} \qquad (Y \in \{-1, +1\})$$

Weights: w_1 w_2 w_N

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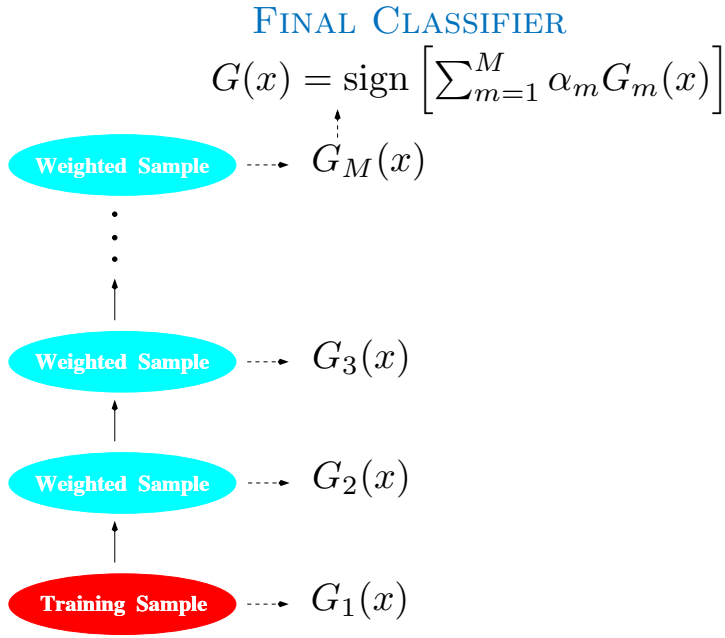

FIGURE 10.1. *Schematic of AdaBoost. Classifiers are trained on weighted versions of the dataset, and then combined to produce a final prediction.*

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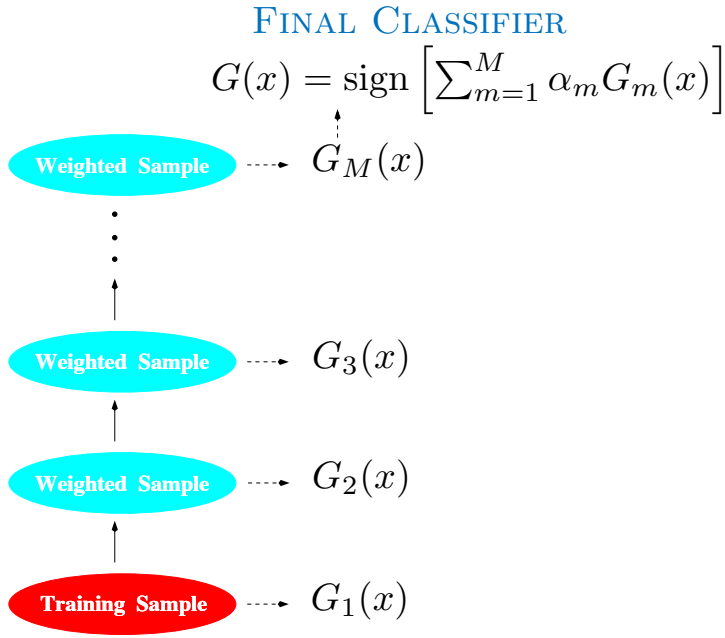

FIGURE 10.1. *Schematic of AdaBoost. Classifiers are trained on weighted versions of the dataset, and then combined to produce a final prediction.*

To train G_m, increase weights for examples misclassified by G_{m-1}

- Force learning to concentrate on difficult examples
- But **how** should we update the weights?

Boosting Decision Stumps

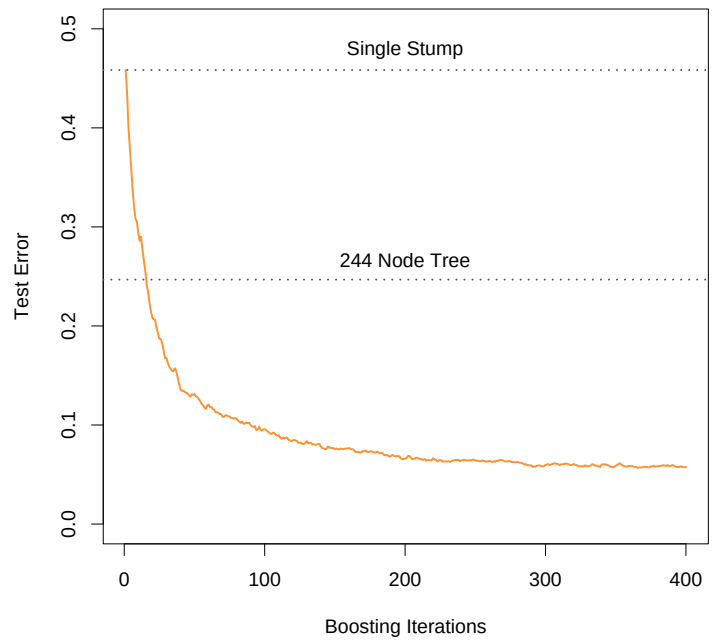

FIGURE 10.2. *Simulated data (10.2): test error rate for boosting with stumps, as a function of the number of iterations. Also shown are the test error rate for a single stump, and a* 244*-node classification tree.*

AdaBoost

Algorithm 10.1 *AdaBoost.M1.*

1. Initialize the observation weights $w_i = 1/N,\ i = 1, 2, \ldots, N$.
2. For $m = 1$ to M:
   (a) Fit a classifier $G_m(x)$ to the training data using weights w_i.
   (b) Compute
   $$\text{err}_m = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i I(y_i \neq G_m(x_i))}{\sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i}.$$
   (c) Compute $\alpha_m = \log((1 - \text{err}_m)/\text{err}_m)$.
   (d) Set $w_i \leftarrow w_i \cdot \exp[\alpha_m \cdot I(y_i \neq G_m(x_i))],\ i = 1, 2, \ldots, N$.
3. Output $G(x) = \text{sign}\left[\sum_{m=1}^{M} \alpha_m G_m(x)\right]$.

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But why update the weights like this?

Forward Stagewise Additive Modeling

Additive Models:

$$f(x) = \sum_{m=1}^{M} \beta_m \, b_{\gamma_m}(x)$$

weights

basis functions with parameters γ_m

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Fitting by ERM often computationally difficult:

$$\min_{(\beta_m, \gamma_m)_{m=1,\dots,M}} \quad \sum_{i=1}^{N} L\Big(Y_i, \sum_{m=1}^{M} \beta_m b_{\gamma_m}(X_i)\Big)$$

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Forward Stagewise Additive Modeling (FSAM):

For $m = 1, \dots, M$:

- $f_m(x) = f_{m-1}(x) + \beta_m b_{\gamma_m}(x)$
- where we find parameters β_m, γ_m by ERM:

$$\min_{\beta_m, \gamma_m} \quad \sum_{i=1}^{N} L\Big(Y_i, f_{m-1}(X_i) + \beta_m b_{\gamma_m}(X_i)\Big)$$

AdaBoost as FSAM I

Basis functions: G_m
Exponential loss: $L\big(Y, f(X)\big) = e^{-Yf(X)}$

$$\begin{aligned}\beta_m, G_m &= \arg\min_{\beta, G} \sum_{i=1}^{N} e^{-Y_i\Big(f_{m-1}(X_i)+\beta G(X_i)\Big)} \\ &= \arg\min_{\beta, G} \sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i^{(m)} e^{-\beta Y_i G(X_i)},\end{aligned}$$

where $w_i^{(m)} = \frac{e^{-Y_i f_{m-1}(X_i)}}{Z^{(m)}}$ for normalization $Z^{(m)} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} e^{-Y_i f_{m-1}(X_i)}$.

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Solve first for G given any fixed $\beta \geq 0$:

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$$= \min_G \; (e^{\beta} - e^{-\beta}) \sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i^{(m)} L_{0/1}(Y_i, G(X_i)) + e^{-\beta} \underbrace{\sum_{i=1}^{N} w_i^{(m)}}_{1}$$

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Weighted ERM (view 2a in AdaBoost as approximately solving this):

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Solve for β:

$$0 = \frac{\mathrm{d}}{\mathrm{d}\beta}(e^{\beta} - e^{-\beta}) \, \mathrm{err}_m + e^{-\beta} = (e^{\beta} + e^{-\beta}) \, \mathrm{err}_m - e^{-\beta}$$

$$(e^{2\beta} + 1) \, \mathrm{err}_m = 1 \quad \rightarrow \quad \beta = \tfrac{1}{2} \log \frac{1 - \mathrm{err}_m}{\mathrm{err}_m} = \tfrac{1}{2} \alpha_m$$

AdaBoost as FSAM II

Updating the weights:

$$w_i^{(m)} = \frac{e^{-Y_i f_{m-1}(X_i)}}{Z^{(m)}}$$

$$\propto \frac{e^{-Y_i f_{m-2}(X_i)}}{Z^{(m-1)}} e^{-Y_i \beta_{m-1} G_{m-1}(X_i)}$$

$$\boxed{Z^{(m)} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} e^{-Y_i f_{m-1}(X_i)}}$$

AdaBoost as FSAM II

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&= w_i^{(m-1)} e^{-Y_i \beta_{m-1} G_{m-1}(X_i)} \\
&= w_i^{(m-1)} e^{\beta_{m-1}\left(2\mathbb{1}[G_{m-1}(X_i) \neq Y_i] - 1\right)}
\end{aligned}
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&= w_i^{(m-1)} e^{\beta_{m-1}\left(2\mathbb{1}[G_{m-1}(X_i) \neq Y_i] - 1\right)} \\
&\propto w_i^{(m-1)} e^{\alpha_{m-1}\mathbb{1}[G_{m-1}(X_i) \neq Y_i]} \qquad \leftarrow \text{Weight update 2d in AdaBoost!}
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Classification rule for the learned function:

$$\operatorname{sign}\left(f_M(X)\right) = \operatorname{sign}\Big(\sum_{m=1}^{M} \beta_m G_m(X)\Big)$$

$$= \operatorname{sign}\Big(\sum_{m=1}^{M} \alpha_m G_m(X)\Big) = G(X) \quad \leftarrow \text{Line 3 in AdaBoost}$$

Theoretical Guarantee

Assumptions:

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Theorem (Freund and Schapire [1997])

Under these assumptions, the classifier $\hat{f}(X) = \text{sign}\left(f_M(X)\right)$ *produced by AdaBoost after* M *iterations can fit the training data as well as we like by taking* M *large enough:*

$$\frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} L_{0/1}(Y_i, \hat{f}(X_i)) \leq (1 - 4\epsilon^2)^{M/2}$$

Proved in Machine Learning Theory master course

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- Theory: if $\mathcal{F}_{\text{small}}$ not too complex, then majority vote among M elements from $\mathcal{F}_{\text{small}}$ does not overfit as long as M is not too large
- Practice: error on test set often does not get worse even if we take M to be very large

Illustration

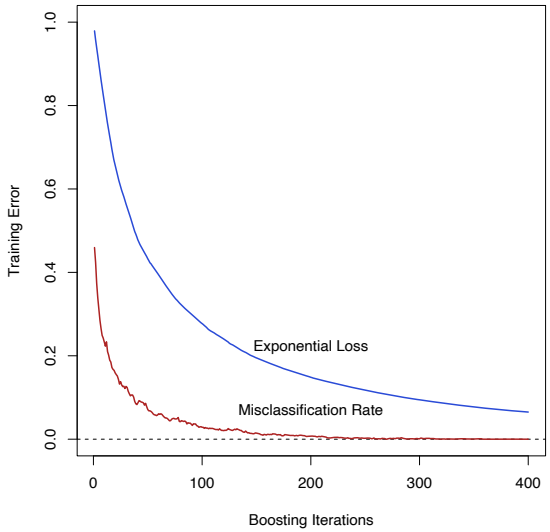


FIGURE 10.3. *Simulated data, boosting with stumps: misclassification error rate on the training set, and average exponential loss:* $(1/N)\sum_{i=1}^{N}\exp(-y_i f(x_i))$. *After about 250 iterations, the misclassification error is zero, while the exponential loss continues to decrease.*

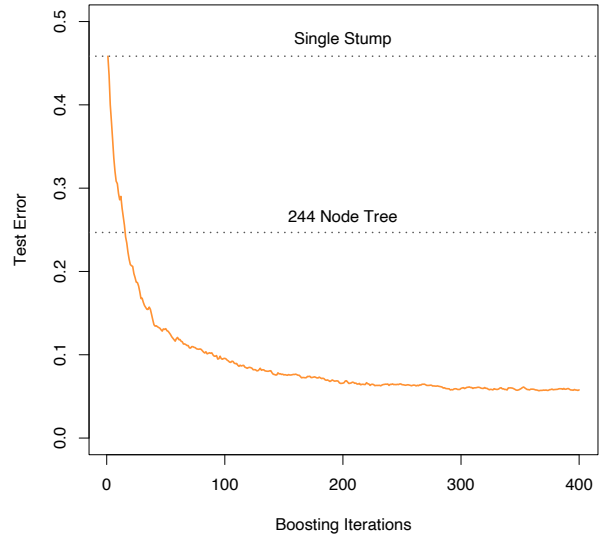
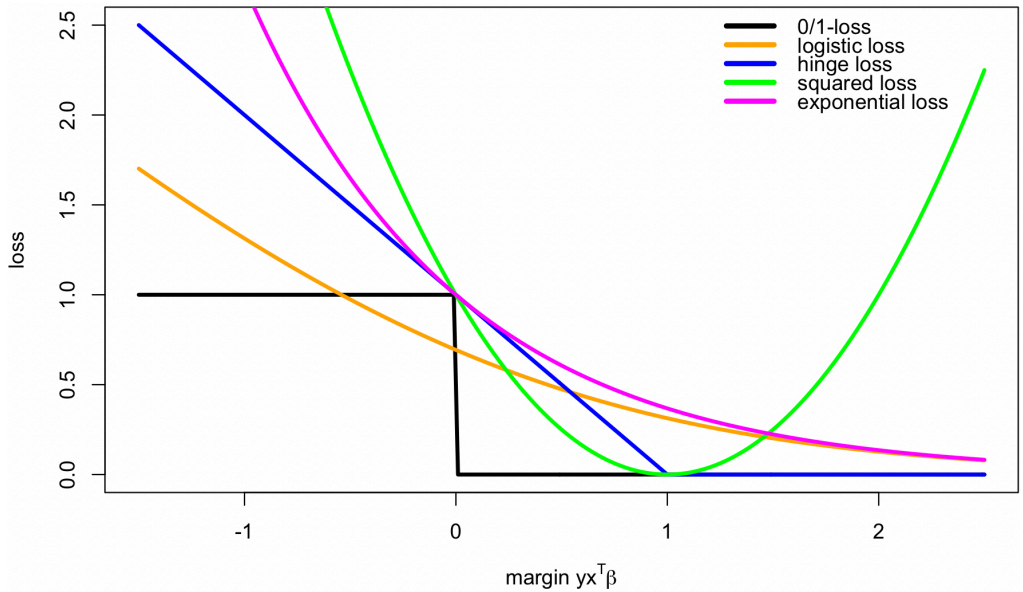


FIGURE 10.2. *Simulated data (10.2): test error rate for boosting with stumps, as a function of the number of iterations. Also shown are the test error rate for a single stump, and a 244-node classification tree.*

As number of boosting iterations M grows:

- Training error/misclassification rate goes to 0 (left)
- Test set error keeps decreasing and then stabilizes (right), but does not go up, so does not overfit even for large M
- Exponential loss also keeps decreasing (left)

Discussion: Exponential Loss

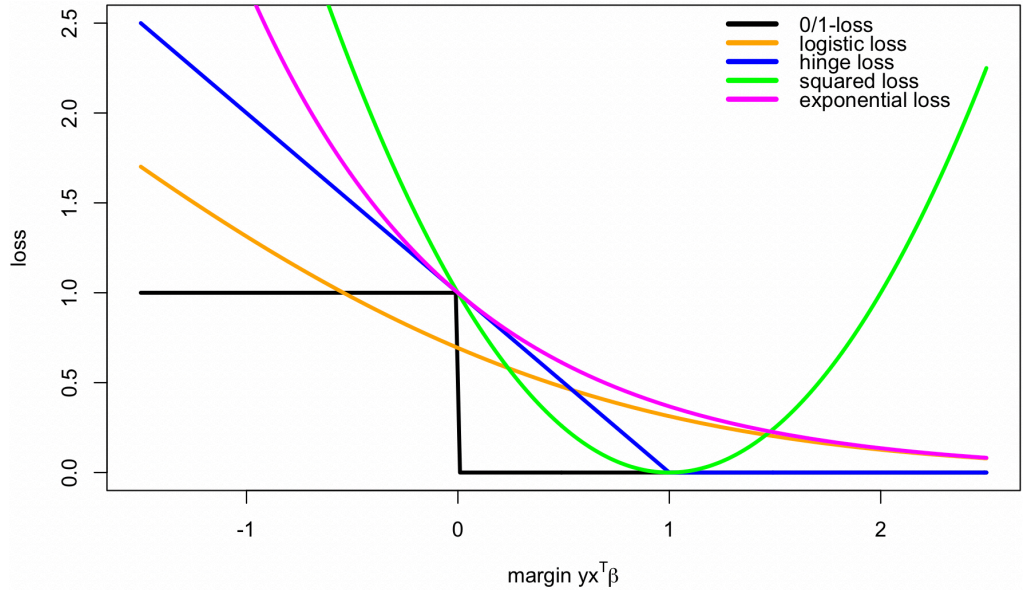


Estimate in population:

$$f_{\mathsf{B}}(x) = \arg\min_{\hat{Y}} \mathbb{E}\left[e^{-Y\hat{Y}} \mid X = x\right] = \frac{1}{2}\log\frac{P^*(Y = +1 \mid X = x)}{P^*(Y = -1 \mid X = x)}$$

So exponential loss tries to estimate log odds of classes.

Discussion: Exponential Loss



Behavior under label noise:

- Suppose assumption of no label noise is violated
- Exponential loss: strongly punishes large negative margin
- $\rightarrow$ AdaBoost gives large weights to data points that are misclassified with large margin
- $\rightarrow$ Not robust in settings where this is unavoidable: large noise or mislabeled data
- Then might be better to use alternative loss like binomial deviance $\approx$ logistic loss, although might be computationally more challenging

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