MABSplit: Faster Forest Training Using Multi-Armed Bandits

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Abstract

Ensemble learning methods, such as random forest, are some of the most widely used machine learning models, especially in domains that necessitate interpretability. We present an algorithm that accelerates the training of random forest and other popular tree-based learning methods. At the core of our algorithm is a novel and fast node-splitting subroutine, dubbed MABSplit , used to efficiently find split points for constructing decision trees. Our algorithm borrows techniques from the multi-armed bandit literature to judiciously determine how to allocate computational power across the set of features. We provide theoretical guarantees the MABSplit improves the computational complexity from linear to logarithmic in the number of data points. Even on small datasets such as MNIST, our algorithm leads to 7x faster training (an 85% reduction in training time) without any decrease in test accuracy. We demonstrate similar speedups when our subroutine is used across a variety of forest-based variants, such as Extremely Random Forests and Random Patches. We also show our algorithm can be used in both classification and regression tasks. Finally, MABSplit outperforms existing methods in test performance and feature importance calculation under a fixed computational budget.

1 Introduction

Random forest (RF) is a supervised learning technique that is widely used for classification and regression tasks [20, 10]. In RF, an ensemble of decision trees (DTs) is trained for the same prediction task. Typically, *bootstrapping* [9] is used to generate multiple samples from a set of datapoints, each of which is used to train a separate DT. Moreover, in the process of training each DT, a random subset of the features is considered at each candidate split. The prediction of the different DTs is then be aggregated to provide a single prediction. Common aggregation schemes include majority voting in classification tasks and averaging in regression tasks. By aggregating the prediction of the different DTs in the ensemble, RFs tend to be more robust against noise and overfitting [37] and are capable of capturing multiple patterns in the data, as opposed to a single DT [40].

RF has gained tremendous popularity due to its flexibility, usefulness in multi-class classification and regression tasks, high performance across a broad range of data types, and its relatively low computational complexity [42, 38, 7, 26]. Furthermore, RF inherits the interpretability of decision trees, as the prediction of each individual DT can be explained through a sequence of binary decisions. RFs have been successfully applied in contexts as varied as the prediction of legal court decisions [23], solar radiation analysis [7], and the Higgs Boson classification problem [2]. As we move into the era of big data, a simple and flexible machine learning technique such as RF is expected to play a key role in processing large datasets – e.g., from the biological sciences, atmospheric sciences, and social networks – and providing accurate and interpretable predictions.

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The need for training prediction models on massive datasets and doing so on lightweight hardware (such as smartphones and Internet-of-Things devices) requires the development of new algorithms that can deliver faster performance without sacrificing results [42]. For that reason, recent work has proposed ways to accelerate the training of RFs, both at the algorithmic level and at the hardware level. At the algorithmic level, the focus is on the fast construction of each individual decision tree. A decision tree is built by identifying a feature f and a threshold t that best split the data points according to the class labels. The data points are split based on f and t, and the process is repeated for each resulting subset. The key computational bottleneck is the subroutine required for identifying the pair (f, t) that provides the best split for a set of N data points, which typically requires $O(N)$ computation per split. Recent proposals include computing (or estimating) f and t from a subsample of the data points and a subset of the features, or quantizing the feature values. The latter technique creates a histogram of values of each feature across the datapoints and restricts t to be at the edges of histogram bins. In Subsection 1.1, we discuss these approaches in more detail.

While existing approaches provide significant speedups in the training of RFs, they are often based on a pre-defined strategy in terms of the number of data points and number of features to consider at each split. As such, they are not able to adjust to specifics of the data distribution or obtain speedups from adaptivity. Moreover, when comparing different candidate features f for a split, all features are treated equally and the quality of their split is computed based on the same number of data points. Intuitively, this is wasteful as features that are not informative for the prediction task can be identified based on a very small number of data points. Alternatively, an adaptive scheme could better allocate computational resources towards a promising set of candidate features and achieve a better tradeoff between computational cost and accuracy.

In this work, we propose MABSplit, a fast subroutine for the node splitting problem, which adaptively refines the estimate of the "quality" of each feature-threshold pair (f, t) as a candidate split. In this way, bad splitting candidates can be discarded early, which can lead to significant computational savings. The main idea behind our algorithm is to cast the node-splitting task as a multi-armed bandit problem [25, 1, 4, 39], where each pair (f, t) is a distinct arm. The unknown parameter of each arm, μ_{ft}, corresponds to the quality of the split of the data points $\mathcal{X} = \{x_1, \ldots, x_N\}$ based on feature f and threshold t. The split quality is measured in terms of how much the split would reduce label impurity, for a chosen label impurity measure such as Gini impurity. An arm (f, t) can be "pulled" by computing the reduction of label impurity on a small subset of data points from $\mathcal{X}$. This allows us to compute an estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ and a corresponding confidence interval, which can be used in a batched variant of the Upper Confidence Bound (UCB) and successive elimination algorithms [25, 44] to identify the best arm (f, t).

We demonstrate the benefits of MABSplit on a variety of datasets, for both classification and regression tasks. Even on small datasets such as MNIST, our algorithm leads to 7x faster training (an 85% reduction in training time) without any decrease in test accuracy over an exact implementation of RF that searches for the optimal (f, t) pair via brute-force computation. Additionally, we demonstrate similar speedups when using MABSplit across a variety of forest-based variants, such as Extremely Random Forests and Random Patches.

1.1 Related work

Random Forests were originally proposed by Ho [20]. In its basic formulation, a RF involves constructing n_{tree} DTs, each based on a bootstrap sample of N data points and a random subset of the features (known as random subspacing [21]). More recently, the need for training RFs on large-scale datasets has prompted the development of several techniques to accelerate the training process, both at the software and at the hardware levels.

Software acceleration of RF: Most of the software/algorithmic acceleration techniques are based on accelerating the training of each individual DT. FastForest [42] accelerates the node-splitting task using three ideas: subsampling a pre-specified number of datapoints (subbagging) without replacement, subsampling a pre-specified number of features dependent on the current number of data points (Dynamic Restricted Subspacing), and dividing values of a given feature into T bins where T depends on the number of data points at the node (Logarithmic Split-Point Sampling, inspired by the single-tree SPAARC algorithm [43]). MABSplit is inspired by the ideas in FastForest, but does not require the number of datapoints or features to be pre-specified as these are determined adaptively.

The idea of using adaptivity to identify the best split has appeared in a few previous works. For example, Very Fast Decision Tree (VFDT) [13] and Extremely Fast Decision Tree (EFDT) [29] are incremental decision tree learning algorithms in which trees can be updated in streaming settings. Acceleration at the node-splitting task is achieved by adaptively selecting a subset of data points sufficient to distinguish the best and second best features. This is similar to our approach, but the sampled data points are evaluated for all features, unlike in MABSplit, which adaptively discards unpromising feature splits. The F-forest [16] algorithm also applies adaptivity and utilizes an upper bound on the impurity reduction of a split in order to discard candidate splits early and save on computation. This is similar in spirit to the goal of MABSplit, but is based on a deterministic upper bound on the impurity reduction (as opposed to our statistical estimate) and is linear in N per split computation, even when considering a fixed number of splitting thresholds per feature.

Other variations of RF have been proposed to improve training time. Random Patches [28] builds trees based on a subset of data points and a subset of features (which is fixed for each entire DT, unlike in RF). Extra-Trees (ETs) [17] draws a random subset of K feature at each node and, for each one, selects a number R of random splits, and then selects among these KR candidate splits the one that yields the largest impurity reduction. Other recent work attempts to accelerate RF training by identifying the optimal number of decision trees needed in the forest [31], a form of hyperparameter tuning. The MABSplit subroutine can also be incorporated into these methods.

Hardware acceleration of RF: The training of RFs can also be significantly accelerated through the use of specialized hardware. For instance, the implementation of RF available in Weka [14] allows trees to be trained at different cores and reduces forest build time. A GPU-based parallel implementation of RF has also been proposed in [18]. These solutions require specialized hardware (e.g., GPU-based PC video cards) and are inappropriate everyday users locally executing data-mining tasks on standard PCs or smartphones. As such, it is also desirable to develop techniques to improve classification accuracy and processing speed on standard platforms.

2 Preliminaries

We consider N data points $\{(\mathbf{x}_i, y_i)\}_{i=1}^N$ such that each $\mathbf{x}_i$ is a M-dimensional feature vector and y_i is its label. Following standard RF literature, we consider flexible feature types such as numerical or categorical; RFs also deal naturally with missing values [22]. We also consider both categorical data labels for classification and numerical data labels for regression. With a slight abuse of notation, we use $\mathcal{X}$ to mean either the set of indices $\{i\}$ or the values $\{(\mathbf{x}_i, y_i)\}$, with the meaning clear from context.

A random forest contains n_{tree} decision trees, each constructed using a set of bootstrapped N samples (sample with replacement) and a random set of features (typically $\sqrt{M}$ [8]) at each node for a given tree; it outputs the majority vote across trees for the classification task and average prediction across all trees for the regression task [20, 10]. We focus on the top-down approach of constructing DTs by choosing a variable at each step that best splits the set of labels at a given node [37]. Specifically, consider a node with n data points $\mathcal{X}$ and m features $\mathcal{F}$. Let $\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}$ and $\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}$ be the left and right child subsets of $\mathcal{X}$, split according to feature f at threshold t. The approach finds the split that best reduces the label impurity; i.e., it finds

$$f^*, t^* = \underset{f \in \mathcal{F}, t \in \mathcal{T}_f}{\arg\min} \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}) + \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}) - I(\mathcal{X}), \tag{1}$$

where $I(\mathcal{X})$ measures labels impurity of $\{y_i\}_{i \in \mathcal{X}}$ and $\mathcal{T}_f$ is the set of feasible thresholds for feature f. Common impurity measures include Gini impurity or entropy for classification, and mean-squared-error (MSE) for regression [11]:

$$\text{Gini} : 1 - \sum_{k=1}^{K} p_k^2, \quad \text{entropy} : -\sum_{k=1}^{K} p_k \log_2 p_k, \quad \text{MSE} : \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i \in \mathcal{X}} (y_i - \bar{y})^2, \tag{2}$$

where K is the total number of classes, $p_k = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i \in \mathcal{X}} \mathbb{I}(y_i = k)$ is the proportion of class k in $\mathcal{X}$, and $\bar{y} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i \in \mathcal{X}} y_i$ is the average response value. We note that our proposed algorithm, MABSplit, does not assume a particular structure of $I(\cdot)$.

While the conventional RF considers all $(n-1)$ possible splits at a feature f, in this work we focus on the histogram-based variation which chooses the threshold from a set of predefined values $\mathcal{T}_f$, e.g., $|\mathcal{T}_f|$ equally-spaced histogram bin edges; this variation is substantially more computationally efficient, offers comparable accuracy, and has been the approach of most state-of-the-art implementations [36, 12, 24, 43].

3 MABSplit

Without loss of generality, consider the classification task with K classes. RF constructs n_{tree} DTs, each of which requires recursively partitioning data points at a given node across a set of $\sqrt{M}$ features. Consider a node with n data points $\mathcal{X}$, m features $\mathcal{F}$, and T possible thresholds for each feature $\mathcal{T}_f$. We note that n and m at the given node may or may not be the same as N and M of the entire data set. A naive algorithm finds the best feature-threshold pairs in Eq. (1) by evaluating the label impurity reduction for each feature-threshold over all n data points, incurring computational cost linear in n.

We present MABSplit, which can substantially reduce this complexity to sublinear in n. Note that Eq. (1) is equivalent to

$$f^*, t^* = \underset{f \in \mathcal{F}, t \in \mathcal{T}_f}{\arg\min} \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}) + \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}) \tag{3}$$

and so we focus on solving Eq. (3). Let $\mu_{ft} = \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}) + \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}|}{n} I(\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft})$ be the optimization objective for feature-threshold pair (f,t). Computing μ_{ft} exactly is at least $O(n)$[1], but we can instead estimate μ_{ft} with fewer computations by drawing $n' < n$ independent samples uniformly with replacement from $\mathcal{X}$. As shown in Subsec. 3.1, it is possible to construct a point estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}(n')$ and a $(1-\delta)$ confidence interval (CI) $C_{ft}(n', \delta)$ for the parameter μ_{ft}, where n' and δ determine estimation accuracy. The width of CIs generally scales with $\sqrt{\frac{\log 1/\delta}{n'}}$. To estimate the solution to Problem (3) with high confidence, we can then choose to sample data points for different features to different degrees of accuracy. Intuitively, promising features with small values of μ_{ft} should be estimated with high accuracy, while less promising ones can be discarded without being evaluated on too many data points.

The specific adaptive estimation procedure is described in Algorithm 1. It can be viewed as a batched version of the conventional UCB algorithm [25, 44] combined with successive elimination [15], and is straightforward to implement. Algorithm 1 uses the set $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ to track all potential solutions to Problem (3); $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ is initialized as the set of all feature-threshold pairs $\{(f,t)\}$. Then, for each potential solution $(f,t) \in \mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$, Algorithm 1 maintains its mean objective estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ and $(1-\delta)$ CI C_{ft}.

In each iteration, a new batch of data points $\mathcal{X}_{\text{batch}}$ is evaluated for all potential solutions in $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$, allowing us to update the histogram for each feature f and make the estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ more accurate. Based on the current estimate, if a candidate's lower confidence bound $\hat{\mu}_{ft} - C_{ft}$ is greater than the upper confidence bound of the most promising candidate $\min_{f,t}(\hat{\mu}_{ft} + C_{ft})$, we remove it from $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$. This process continues until there is only one candidate in $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ or until we have sampled more than n data points. In the latter case, we know that the difference between the remaining candidates in $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ is so subtle that an exact computation is warranted. We then compute those candidates' objectives exactly and return the best candidates in the set.

3.1 Point estimate and confidence interval for impurity metrics

We consider two widely used impurity metrics, Gini impurity and entropy, although mean estimates and confidence intervals for other metrics can be derived similarly (more details are provided in Appendix 3). We consider point estimates and confidence intervals of μ_{ft} based on a set of n' points, $\{(\mathbf{X}_i, Y_i)\}_{i=1}^{n'}$, sampled independently and with replacement.

Let $p_{\text{L},k} := \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} \mathbb{I}(x_{if} < t, y_i = k)$ and $p_{\text{R},k} := \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} \mathbb{I}(x_{if} \geq t, y_i = k)$ denote the proportion of the full n data points in class k and each of the two subsets ("left" and "right"),

[1] More precisely $O(nK)$, but we focus on the dependency on n here.

Algorithm 1 MABSplit ($\mathcal{X}, \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{T}_f, I(\cdot), B, \delta$)

$\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}} \leftarrow \{(f,t),\ \forall\, f \in \mathcal{F},\ \forall t \in \mathcal{T}_f\}$ ▷ Set of potential solutions to Problem (3)
$n_{\text{used}} \leftarrow 0$ ▷ Number of data points sampled
For all $(f,t) \in \mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$, set $\hat{\mu}_{ft} \leftarrow \infty$, $C_{ft} \leftarrow \infty$ ▷ Initialize mean and CI for each arm
for all $f \in \mathcal{F}$ **do**
    Create empty histogram, h_f, with equally spaced bins
while $n_{\text{used}} < n$ and $|\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}| > 1$ **do**
    Draw a batch sample of size B with replacement $\mathcal{X}_{\text{batch}} \subset \mathcal{X}$
    for all unique f in $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ **do**
        for all x in $\mathcal{X}_{\text{batch}}$ **do**
            Insert x_f into histogram h_f ▷ Each insertion is $O(1)$
    for all $(f,t) \in \mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$ **do**
        Update $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ and C_{ft} based on histogram h_f ▷ Update running mean and CI in $O(T)$
    $\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}} \leftarrow \{(f,t) : \hat{\mu}_{ft} - C_{ft} \leq \min_{f,t}(\hat{\mu}_{ft} + C_{ft})\}$ ▷ Retain only promising points
    $n_{\text{used}} \leftarrow n_{\text{used}} + B$
if $|\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}| = 1$ **then**
    return $(f^*, t^*) \in \mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$
else
    Compute μ_{ft} exactly for all $(f,t) \in \mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}$
    return $(f^*, t^*) = \arg\min_{(f,t)\in\mathcal{S}_{\text{solution}}} \mu_{ft}$

respectively. Notice that

$$\sum_k p_{\text{L},k} = \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{L},ft}|}{n} \quad \text{and} \quad \sum_k p_{\text{R},k} = \frac{|\mathcal{X}_{\text{R},ft}|}{n}. \tag{4}$$

Furthermore, let $\hat{p}_{\text{L},k} := \frac{1}{n'}\sum_{i=1}^{n'} \mathbb{I}(X_{if} < t, Y_i = k)$ and $\hat{p}_{\text{R},k} := \frac{1}{n'}\sum_{i=1}^{n'} \mathbb{I}(X_{if} \geq t, Y_i = k)$ denote the empirical estimates of $p_{\text{L},k}$ and $p_{\text{R},k}$ based on the n' subsamples. Then, $\{\hat{p}_{\text{L},k}, \hat{p}_{\text{R},k}\}_{k=1}^K$ jointly follow a multinomial distribution (since for each random data point $(\mathbf{X}_i, Y_i)$, exactly one of these variables is incremented) satisfying

$$\mathbb{E}[\hat{p}_{\text{L},k}] = p_{\text{L},k}, \quad \text{Var}[\hat{p}_{\text{L},k}] = \frac{1}{n'} p_{\text{L},k}(1 - p_{\text{L},k}),$$
$$\mathbb{E}[\hat{p}_{\text{R},k}] = p_{\text{R},k}, \quad \text{Var}[\hat{p}_{\text{R},k}] = \frac{1}{n'} p_{\text{R},k}(1 - p_{\text{R},k}).$$

Using Eqs. (2) and (4), and the definition of μ_{ft} after Eq. (3), we can write

$$\text{Gini impurity}: \ \mu_{ft} = 1 - \frac{\sum_k p_{\text{L},k}^2}{\sum_k p_{\text{L},k}} - \frac{\sum_k p_{\text{R},k}^2}{\sum_k p_{\text{R},k}}, \tag{5}$$

$$\text{Entropy}: \ \mu_{ft} = -\sum_k p_{\text{L},k} \log_2 \frac{p_{\text{L},k}}{\sum_{k'} p_{\text{L},k'}} - \sum_k p_{\text{R},k} \log_2 \frac{p_{\text{R},k}}{\sum_{k'} p_{\text{R},k'}}, \tag{6}$$

where we can replace the true parameters $\{p_{\text{L},k}, p_{\text{R},k}\}_{k=1}^K$ with the empirical parameters $\{\hat{p}_{\text{L},k}, \hat{p}_{\text{R},k}\}_{k=1}^K$ in the equations above to produce the point estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$. In Algorithm 1, after each batch of B data points is obtained, we update $\hat{p}_{\text{L},k}$ and $\hat{p}_{\text{R},k}$, which can then be used to update our point estimate $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ and the corresponding CIs; the CIs of $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ are based on standard error derived using the delta method [41]. As in standard applications of the delta method, these estimates $\hat{\mu}_{ft}$ are asymptotically unbiased and the confidence intervals are asymptotically valid. Appendix 3 provides further details including derivation of CIs, discussion of convergence properties, and results for other metrics such as MSE.

3.2 Algorithmic and implementation details

We considered sampling with replacement Algorithm 1 primarily for the ease of theoretical analysis. In practice, we found sampling without replacement was more computationally efficient and did not significantly change the results, and was used in the actual implementation.

For DTs, in classification tasks, we allow individual DTs to provide soft votes and average their predicted class probabilities to determine the forest's predicted class label, following existing approaches. This is in contrast with hard votes, in which each DT is only permitted to produce its best label and the forest's prediction is determined by majority voting. For the fixed-budget experiments described in 5, we terminate tree construction and do not split the next node if doing so would violate our budget constraints.

Finally, we note that a head-to-head comparison with common implementations of forest-based algorithms, such as Weka's [14] or sklearn's [33], would be unfair due to their extensive hardware- and language-level optimizations in those implementations. As such, we reimplemented these baselines in Python and focused on algorithmic improvements. We verified the quality of our own implementations agreed with that of sklearn in the appendices. The only difference between our model and the baselines is the call to the node splitting subroutine (MABSplit in our model, and the exact, brute-force solver for the baseline models); thus, any improvements in runtime are due to improvements in the node-splitting algorithm. This is verified by profiling the implementations and measuring the relative time spent in the node-splitting subroutine versus total runtime (see Appendix 5). This allows us to focus on algorithmic improvements as opposed implementation-specific optimizations. Our implementation of these baselines may be of independent interest.

4 Analysis of the Algorithm

In this section, we prove that MABSplit returns the optimal feature-threshold pair for a node split with high probability. Furthermore, we provide bounds on computational complexity of MABSplit, leading to the logarithmic dependency on the number of data points n.

Consider a node with n data points $\mathcal{X}$, m features $\mathcal{F}$, and T possible thresholds for each feature ($|\mathcal{T}_f| = T$ for all f). Suppose $(f^*, t^*) = \arg\min_{f\in\mathcal{F}, t\in\mathcal{T}_f} \mu_{ft}$ is the optimal feature-threshold pair at which to split the node. For any other feature-threshold pair (f, t), define $\Delta_{ft} := \mu_{ft} - \mu_{f^*t^*}$. To state the following results, we will assume that, for a fixed feature-threshold pair (f, t) and n' randomly sampled data point, the $(1-\delta)$ confidence interval scales as $C_{ft}(n', \delta) = O(\sqrt{\frac{\log 1/\delta}{n'}})$. This is the case for the confidence intervals of Gini impurity and entropy in Subsec. 3.1 [41]. With this assumption, we state the following theorem:

Theorem 1. *Assume* $\exists c_0 > 0$ *s.t.* $\forall \delta > 0, n' > 0, C_{ft}(n', \delta) < c_0\sqrt{\frac{\log 1/\delta}{n'}}$. *For* $\delta = \frac{1}{n^2mT}$, *with probability at least* $1 - \frac{1}{n}$, *Algorithm 1 returns the correct solution to* (3). *Furthermore, Algorithm 1 uses a total of* M *computations, where*

$$\mathbb{E}[M] \leq \sum_{f\in\mathcal{F}, t\in\mathcal{T}_f} \min\left[\frac{4c_0^2}{\Delta_{ft}^2}\log(n^2mT) + B, 2n\right] + 2mT. \tag{7}$$

Theorem 1 is proven in Appendix 1. Intuitively, Theorem 1 states that with high probability, MABSplit returns the optimal feature-threshold pair at which to split the node. The instance-wise bound Eq. (7) suggests the computation cost of a feature-threshold pair (f, t), i.e., $\min\left[\frac{4c_0^2}{\Delta_{ft}^2}\log(n^2mT) + B, 2n\right]$, depends on Δ_{ft}, which measures how close its optimization parameter μ_{ft} is to $\mu_{f^*t^*}$. Most reasonably different features $f \neq f^*$ will have a large Δ_{ft} and incur a $O(\log(n^2mT))$ computation that is sublinear in n.

In general, MABSplit takes only $O(\log(n^2mT))$ computations per feature-threshold pair if there is reasonable heterogeneity among them. As proven in Appendix 2 in [4], this is the case under a wide range of distributional assumptions on the μ_{ft}'s, e.g., when the μ_{ft}'s follow a sub-Gaussian distribution across the pairs (f, t). These assumptions ensure that MABSplit has an overall complexity of $O(mT\log(n^2mT))$, which is sublinear in the number of data points n. However, we note that MABSplit may take $O(n)$ computation per feature-threshold pair when most feature-threshold pairs are equally good, for example in highly symmetric datasets where all splits reduce the impurity equally. Other recent work provides further discussion on the conversion between an instance-wise bound like Equation (7) and an instance-independent bound such as $O(mT\log n)$ [4, 44, 6, 39, 3, 5].

Finally, we note that δ is a hyperparameter governing the error rate. It is possible to prove results analogous to Theorem 1 for arbitrary δ.

Classification: MNIST			
Model	Time (s)	# insertions	Accuracy
RF	379.2 ± 4.8	$3.5e7 \pm 2.1e5$	$77.0 \pm 0.5\%$
RF + MABSplit	**57.0 ± 1.2**	**$4.6e6 \pm 6.5e4$**	**$77 \pm 0.3\%$**
ExtraTrees	440.1 ± 5.1	$4.2e7 \pm 0.0$	$76.7 \pm 0.4\%$
ExtraTrees + MABSplit	**65.5 ± 3.1**	**$5.1e6 \pm 6.0e4$**	**77.1 ± 0.7**
RP	1144.0 ± 53.1	$1.1e8 \pm 1.6e6$	$61.7 \pm 1.2\%$
RP + MABSplit	**168.5 ± 4.1**	**$1.6e7 \pm 3.6e5$**	**$71.6 \pm 1.0\%$**

Table 1: Wall-clock training time, number of histogram insertions, and test accuracies for various models with and without MABSplit. MABSplit accelerates these models by approximately 7x (an 85% reduction in training time) while achieving comparable (and sometimes better) accuracy. The number of histogram insertions correlates strongly with wall-clock training time, which justifies our focus on accelerating the node-splitting algorithm by focusing on histogram insertions.

5 Experimental Results

We demonstrate the advantages of MABSplit in two settings. In the first setting, the baseline models with and without MABSplit are trained to completion, and training time and test performances are measured. In the second setting, we consider training each forest with a fixed computational budget and study effect of MABSplit on test performance.

Datasets: We run experiments on public datasets to validate the behavior of MABSplit, in both classification and regression. For classification, we use the MNIST dataset [27] consisting of 60,000 training and 10,000 test images of handwritten digits, where each black-and-white image is represented as a 784-dimensional vector. For regression, we generate 200,000 datapoints with 50 features, 6 of which are correlated with the targets and 44 of which are pure noise, using `sklearn`'s `make_regression` function [32]; 160,000 datapoints are used for training and the remaining 40,000 for test. We call this dataset the Random Linear Model dataset. The two datasets are available under MIT and BSD licenses, respectively.

Baselines: We compare the histogrammed versions of three baselines with and without MABSplit: Random Forest (RF), Extremely Randomized Forests (ExtraTrees) [17], and Random Patches (RP) [28]. In Random Forests, each tree fits a bootstrap sample of N datapoints and only considers random subset of $\sqrt{M}$ features at every node split. Extremely Randomized Forests are identical to Random Forests except for two differences. First, in regression problems, all features are considered at every node split (in classification problems, we still use only $\sqrt{M}$ features). Second, the histogram edges of a feature are randomly chosen from a uniform distribution over that feature's minimum and maximum value. In classification problems, each histogram has $\sqrt{M}$ bins and in regression problems, each histogram has M bins. These conventions follow standard implementations [32]. Note that in Extremely Randomized Forests, the bins in a feature's histogram need not be equally spaced. In Random Patches, the dataset is reduced to α_n of its original datapoints and α_f of its original features, where α_n and α_f are constants. The reduced dataset is fixed for the training of the entire forest. Full settings for all experiments are given in Appendix 6.

5.1 Wall clock time comparisons

In the first setting, we compare baseline models with and without MABSplit in terms of wall-clock time. Tables 1 and 2 show that MABSplit provides similar test accuracy but leads to faster training than the usual training algorithm for node-splitting for almost all baselines in both classification and regression tasks. Across various tasks, MABSplit leads to 2x-7x faster training, a reduction of training time of 50-85%. As the only difference between successive rows is the node-splitting subroutine. Thus, these benefits are wholly attributable to MABSplit(see Appendix 5).

Regression: Random Linear Model		
Model	Time (s)	MSE
RF	32.1 ± 0.6	807.5 ± 13
RF + MABSplit	$\mathbf{13.9 \pm 0.1}$	$\mathbf{750.2 \pm 12.7}$
ExtraTrees	$\mathbf{625.3 \pm 14.2}$	$\mathbf{3738.7 \pm 56.9}$
ExtraTrees + MABSplit	135.3 ± 20.5	6103.5 ± 186.5
RP	6.2 ± 0.4	9024.6 ± 406.4
RP + MABSplit	$\mathbf{3.3 \pm 0.3}$	$\mathbf{9013.7 \pm 409.2}$

Table 2: Wall-clock training time and test MSEs for various models with and without MABSplit. MABSplit accelerates these models by approximately 2x (an 50% reduction in training time) while achieving comparable results. We omit the number of histogram insertions in favor of wall-clock time for simplicity; unlike in classification, the different baseline regression models have widely varying histogram bin counts. Since the histogram insertion complexity scales as $O(\log T)$, the comparison across models is not fair.

Classification: MNIST (10K subsamples training data points), budget = 10M		
Model	# trees	Accuracy
RF	5.8 ± 0.2	$53.1 \pm 1.0\%$
RF + MABSplit	$\mathbf{100 \pm 0}$	$\mathbf{64.6 \pm 0.4\%}$
ExtraTrees	5.0 ± 0.0	$49.0 \pm 0.7\%$
ExtraTrees + MABSplit	$\mathbf{100 \pm 0}$	$\mathbf{63.8 \pm 0.5\%}$
RP	21.8 ± 0.5	$32.1 \pm 0.7\%$
RP + MABSplit	$\mathbf{37.4 \pm 0.8}$	$\mathbf{40.2 \pm 2.5\%}$

Table 3: Classification performance under a fixed computational budget (number of histogram insertions). MABSplit pares down the computation required to train a tree for each type of model, resulting in more trained trees and better generalization performance.

5.2 Fixed budget comparisons

In the second setting, we consider training a random forest with a fixed computational budget. As before, insertion into a histogram is taken to be an $O(1)$ operation. This is justified if the histogram's thresholds are evenly spaced, in which the correct bin in which to insert a value can be indexed directly. If the bins are unevenly spaced, we may perform binary searches to locate the correct bin, which is $O(\log T)$ and does not depend on n, or cache the results of these binary searches for an evenly-spaced grid across the range of the given feature's value.

Intuitively, the MABSplit algorithm allows for splitting a given node with less data point queries and histogram insertions than the brute force solution. As such, when the computational budget is fixed, forests trained with MABSplit should be able to split more nodes and therefore train more trees than forests trained with the brute force solver. Prior work suggests that increasing the number of trees in a forest improves generalization performance by reducing variance at the cost of slightly increased bias [19].

Tables 3 and 4 demonstrates the generalization performance of different models as the computational budget is held constant for classification and regression, respectively. When using MABSplit, the trained forests consist of more trees and demonstrate better generalization performance across all models.

We also apply MABSplit to compute feature importances under a fixed budget. We follow the commonly used approaches of computing the feature importances of multiple forests and then measuring the stability of feature selection across forests [30, 34]; see Table 5.

Regression: Random Linear Model, Budget = 2,400,000$*Q$		
Model	# trees	MSE
RF ($Q = 10$)	2.0 ± 0	4356.2 ± 51.2
RF + MABSplit ($Q = 10$)	$\mathbf{100 \pm 0}$	$\mathbf{3095.6 \pm 9.5}$
ExtraTrees ($Q = \frac{1}{2}$)	$\mathbf{3 \pm 0}$	$\mathbf{10037 \pm 4.1}$
ExtraTrees + MABSplit ($Q = \frac{1}{2}$)	100 ± 0	10068.1 ± 1.1
RP ($Q = 1$)	2.0 ± 0	8184.8 ± 565.6
RP + MABSplit ($Q = 1$)	$\mathbf{51.6 \pm 2.2}$	$\mathbf{8103.4 \pm 616.4}$

Table 4: Regression performance under a fixed computational budget (number of histogram insertions). MABSplit pares down the computation required to train a tree for each type of model. This results in better performance for the Random Forest baseline, which resamples features at each node split, but not in the Extreme Random Forest or Random Patches model, which analyze a fixed set of features. Those two models underfit the data as the signal is very sparse - only 3 out of 50 available features are informative.

Regression: Random Linear Model, Budget = 1,000,000$*Q$		
Importance Model	# Dataset	Stability
RF + MID($Q = 3.5$)	random classification	0.397 ± 0.031
RF + MABSplit +MID ($Q = 3.5$)	**random classification**	$\mathbf{0.732 \pm 0.014}$
RF + MID ($Q = 5$)	random regression	0.664 ± 0.091
RF + MABSplit + MID ($Q = 5$)	**random regression**	$\mathbf{0.796 \pm 0.014}$
RF + Permutation ($Q = 5$)	digit	0.555 ± 0.022
RF + MABSplit + Permutation ($Q = 5$)	**digit**	$\mathbf{0.69 \pm 0.02}$
RF + Permutation ($Q = 5$)	random regression	0.305 ± 0.039
RF + MABSplit + Permutation ($Q = 5$)	**random regression**	$\mathbf{0.694 \pm 0.019}$

Table 5: Stability scores under a fixed computational budget (number of histogram insertions). MABSplit pares down the computation required to train a tree for each type of model. This results in better performance for the Random Forest stability baseline. Scikit-learn datasets for both classification and regression were used.

6 Discussions and Conclusions

In this work, we presented a novel algorithm, MABSplit, for determining the optimal feature and corresponding feature threshold at which to split a node in tree-based learning models. Unlike prior models such as Random Patches, in which the hyperparameters α_n and α_f must be chosen manually, MABSplit requires no tuning and only queries as much data as is needed. Indeed, robustness to choice of hyperparameters is one of primary appeals of algorithms like RF [35].

MABSplit avoids the expensive $O(n\log n)$ sort used in many existing baselines and can be used in conjunction with existing language- and hardware-specific optimizations. MABSplit can also be used with other methods such as logarithmic split-point sampling and boosting [42]. In boosting, MABSplit has the potential advantage of only needing to update target variables on-the-fly as needed, as opposed to current boosting approaches which update target variables for the entire dataset at each iteration. Additionally, MABSplit may permit easier parallelization due to lower memory requirements than existing algorithms, which may enable greater use in edge computing.

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Checklist

1. For all authors...
   (a) Do the main claims made in the abstract and introduction accurately reflect the paper's contributions and scope? [Yes] We have all reviewed the claims in the abstract and introduction and confirmed that they reflect the paper's contributions and scope.
   (b) Did you describe the limitations of your work? [Yes] We discuss the assumptions necessary for MABSplit to work in Section 4 and also discuss failure modes when these assumptions are violated. We also describe further room to improve our work in Section 6
   (c) Did you discuss any potential negative societal impacts of your work? [Yes] We discuss potential negative societal impacts in the Future Work section
   (d) Have you read the ethics review guidelines and ensured that your paper conforms to them? [Yes] We have all reviewed the ethics review guidelines and ensured that our paper conforms to them.
2. If you are including theoretical results...
   (a) Did you state the full set of assumptions of all theoretical results? [Yes] The statement of Theorem 1 contains a full description of assumptions, which is further expounded upon before and after the theorem statement.
   (b) Did you include complete proofs of all theoretical results? [Yes] The proof of Theorem 1 is provided in Appendix 1
3. If you ran experiments...

(a) Did you include the code, data, and instructions needed to reproduce the main experimental results (either in the supplemental material or as a URL)? [Yes] Yes, full specifications of all experiments are provided in Section 5 and Appendix 6, and full, documented source code is provided to reproduce our results.

(b) Did you specify all the training details (e.g., data splits, hyperparameters, how they were chosen)? [Yes] Yes, full specifications of all experiments are provided in Section 5 and Appendix 6, and full, documented source code is provided to reproduce our results.

(c) Did you report error bars (e.g., with respect to the random seed after running experiments multiple times)? [Yes] Every numerical measurement in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 contains confidence intervals

(d) Did you include the total amount of compute and the type of resources used (e.g., type of GPUs, internal cluster, or cloud provider)? [Yes] Full specifications of computing resources are provided in 6

4. If you are using existing assets (e.g., code, data, models) or curating/releasing new assets...

(a) If your work uses existing assets, did you cite the creators? [Yes] Yes, the only existing assets we used were publicly available datasets, which we cited in Section 5

(b) Did you mention the license of the assets? [Yes] We explicitly mention the licenses in Section 5.

(c) Did you include any new assets either in the supplemental material or as a URL? [Yes] Yes, the only new assets created are in the form of code, which is entirely submitted in the supplemental material

(d) Did you discuss whether and how consent was obtained from people whose data you're using/curating? [Yes] Yes, both datasets we use are publicly available and we mention the licenses in Section 5.

(e) Did you discuss whether the data you are using/curating contains personally identifiable information or offensive content? [N/A] The two datasets are the MNIST dataset and a mathematical dataset; neither have any personally identifiable information or offensive content.

5. If you used crowdsourcing or conducted research with human subjects...

(a) Did you include the full text of instructions given to participants and screenshots, if applicable? [N/A] We did not use crowdsourcing or conduct research with human subjects.

(b) Did you describe any potential participant risks, with links to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, if applicable? [N/A] We did not use crowdsourcing or conduct research with human subjects.

(c) Did you include the estimated hourly wage paid to participants and the total amount spent on participant compensation? [N/A] We did not use crowdsourcing or conduct research with human subjects.