

Machine Learning for Economists and Business Analysts

Anthony Strittmatter

Lecturer

Anthony Strittmatter

Research Interests: Business, Labour, and Health Economics, Program Evaluation, Computational Data Analytics

Positions:

Since 2023	Full Professor for Applied Econometrics at UniDistance Suisse in Brig/Valais
2022-2024	Senior Economist at Amazon in London
2020-2023	Institut Polytechnique and CREST in Paris
2014-2020	University of St.Gallen, with research visits at UC Berkeley, Stanford University, and LMU Munich
2009-2016	Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg

► Email: anthony.strittmatter@unidistance.ch

► Webpage: www.anthonystrittmatter.com

Schedule

	Lecture 1 Monday February 17	Lecture 2 Wednesday February 19	Lecture 3 Friday February 21
Time	10:00-12:00 13:30-15:00 S16 HG.39	10:00-12:00 14:15-15:45 S16 HG.39	10:00-12:00 13:30-15:00 S14 HG.32

	Lecture 4 Wednesday March 5	Lecture 5 Thursday March 6	Lecture 6 Friday March 7
Time	10:00-12:00 14:15-15:45 S16 HG.39	10:00-12:00 13:30-15:00 S16 HG.39	10:00-12:00 13:30-15:00 S16 HG.39

Course Outline

- ▶ **Lecture 1:** Introduction to Statistical Learning
 - ▶ Out-of-Sample Prediction
 - ▶ Prediction vs. Causal Analysis
- ▶ **Lecture 2:** Regularized Regression
 - ▶ Lasso, Ridge, Elastic Net
- ▶ **Lecture 3:** Non-parametric Supervised Machine Learning
 - ▶ Classification and Regression Trees
 - ▶ Random Forests
 - ▶ Deep Learning

Course Outline (cont.)

- ▶ **Lecture 4:** Unsupervised Machine Learning
 - ▶ Clustering
 - ▶ Principal Component Analysis
- ▶ **Lecture 5:** High-Dimensional Confounding
 - ▶ Double Selection Procedure
 - ▶ Double Machine Learning
- ▶ **Lecture 6:** Effect Heterogeneity and Policy Learning
 - ▶ Causal Forest
 - ▶ Optimal Policy Learning
 - ▶ Bandit Algorithms

PC Labs

- ▶ PC labs are integral part of the course.
- ▶ I will provide the entire course material on my GitHub repository:
<https://github.com/AStrittmatter/Machine-Learning-Course>
- ▶ I will use interactive Jupyter notebooks during the PC labs:
<https://mybinder.org/v2/gh/AStrittmatter/Machine-Learning-Course/HEAD>
- ▶ The advantage of the notebooks is that you do not need to install anything and the data is in the correct folder.
- ▶ However, in case the connection to the server is weak I also provide an R-file for download on my GitHub repository. To use it, you need to install R and RStudio on your PC. This are both open source softwares.

Grading

- ▶ Group Data Challenge (Deadline for submission: March 2, 2025)
- ▶ Individual Home Assignment (Deadline for submission: April 27, 2025)
- ▶ Grades: Pass/Fail

General

- ▶ Feel free to interrupt me at any time when you have questions.
- ▶ Tell me when I'm too slow or too fast. Ask me to repeat material in case something was not clear.
- ▶ You can also send me an email with questions:
`anthony.strittmatter@unidistance.ch`
- ▶ Proposals to improve the course are also welcome.
- ▶ Please try to interact as much as possible with your fellow students.
Build learning groups.

References

- ▶ Mullainathan and Spiess (2017): “Machine Learning: An Applied Econometric Approach”, Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31 (2), pp. 87-106, [download](#).
- ▶ Athey (2017): “Beyond Prediction: Using Big Data for Policy Problems”, Science, 355 (6324), pp. 483-485, [download](#).

What is Machine Learning (ML)?

- ▶ ML (or statistical learning) methods exist already since decades.
- ▶ Currently "Machine Learning" is a buzz word
- ▶ Probably most people think of ML as some computational intensive methods that make data-driven modelling decisions and/or can deal with large data amounts.
- ▶ However, relevant textbooks consider even OLS/Logit as a statistical learning tool.

Purpose of Machine Learning

- ▶ Consider the structural model

$$Y = f(X) + \epsilon = X\beta + \epsilon,$$

with $E[\epsilon] = 0$.

- ▶ Causal analysis has the purpose to estimate $\hat{\beta}$, with $plim(\hat{\beta}) = \beta$.
- ▶ **Machine learning** has the purpose to predict Y .
- ▶ There is a clear link between causal analysis and machine learning, because

$$\hat{Y} = \hat{f}(X) = X\hat{\beta}$$

is a potential predictor for Y .

- ▶ Parameter consistency has not the highest priority when it comes to predictions.

Potential Advantages and Disadvantages of ML

- ▶ ML methods can be very powerful to predict Y , even when $\hat{\beta}$ is biased.
- ▶ ML methods can incorporate many (or even high-dimensional) covariates X in a convenient way.
- ▶ ML methods can model $\hat{f}(\cdot)$ in a very flexible and data-driven way.
- ▶ **Main disadvantage:** ML is a black-box approach and we lose the interpretability of $\hat{f}(\cdot)$ or $\hat{\beta}$.

Prediction vs. Causality



Causal vs. Predictive Questions

Predictive Questions:

- ▶ How will the oil price change tomorrow (forecasting)?
- ▶ How high is the current unemployment rate (nowcasting)?
- ▶ Which adolescents have a high probability of becoming addicted to drugs (policy prediction)?

Causal Questions:

- ▶ What is the effect of a tweet by president Donald Trump on oil prices?
- ▶ How does inflation affect the unemployment rate?
- ▶ Can prevention programs reduce the probability of drug addiction among high risk youths?

Assessing the Model Accuracy

Causal Analysis:

- ▶ True β is unobservable.
- ▶ Assess the model with asymptotic properties

$$\sqrt{N}(\hat{\beta} - \beta) \xrightarrow{d} N(0, \sigma^2).$$

- ▶ Finite sample biases are mostly neglected.

Assessing the Model Accuracy

Prediction:

- ▶ We observe Y for each unit (e.g. individual).
- ▶ We can assess the model accuracy directly in the sample of our analysis, for example, using the mean-squared-error (MSE)

$$\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (Y_i - \hat{Y}_i)^2.$$

- ▶ MSE accounts for finite sample biases.

Example: Prediction of Used Car Prices

- ▶ We have access to web-scraped data from the online advertisement platform *myLemons*.
- ▶ We want to predict asking prices of used cars based on observable characteristics.
- ▶ We observe around 40 covariates about car brand, mileage, age, emissions, maintenance certificate, seller type, guarantee, etc. (including several non-linear and interaction terms)

In-Sample MSE

- ▶ Partition data into training and test sample
- ▶ In the training sample, we estimate the empirical model

$$Y_{tr} = \hat{f}_{tr}(X_{tr}) + \hat{\epsilon}_{tr} = X_{tr}\hat{\beta}_{tr} + \hat{\epsilon}_{tr}$$

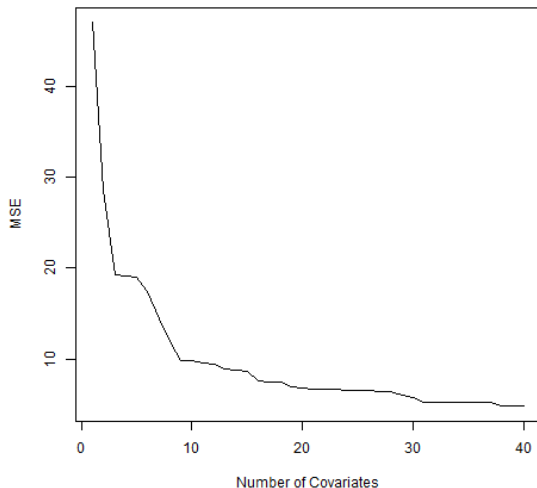
- ▶ In the training sample, we predict the fitted values

$$\hat{Y}_{tr} = \hat{f}_{tr}(X_{tr}) = X_{tr}\hat{\beta}_{tr}$$

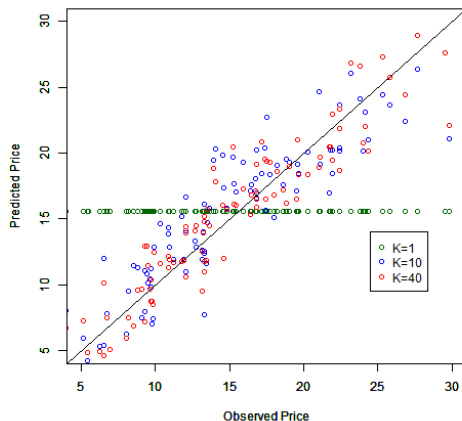
and calculate the MSE

$$\widehat{MSE}_{tr} = \frac{1}{N_{tr}} \sum_{i=1}^{N_{tr}} (Y_{i,tr} - \hat{Y}_{i,tr})^2.$$

MSE in Training Sample



Predicted Car Prices in Training Sample



Number of Covariates	1	10	40
MSE	46.948	9.819	4.866

Out-of-Sample MSE

- In the training sample, we estimate the empirical model

$$Y_{tr} = \hat{f}_{tr}(X_{tr}) + \hat{\epsilon}_{tr} = X_{tr}\hat{\beta}_{tr} + \hat{\epsilon}_{tr}$$

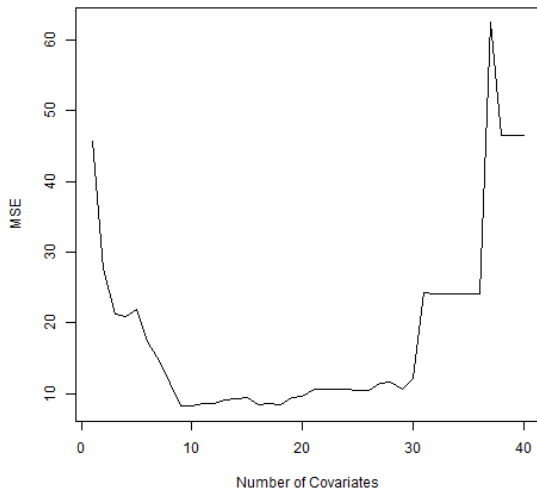
- In the test sample, we predict the fitted values

$$\hat{Y}_{te} = \hat{f}_{tr}(X_{te}) = X_{te}\hat{\beta}_{tr}$$

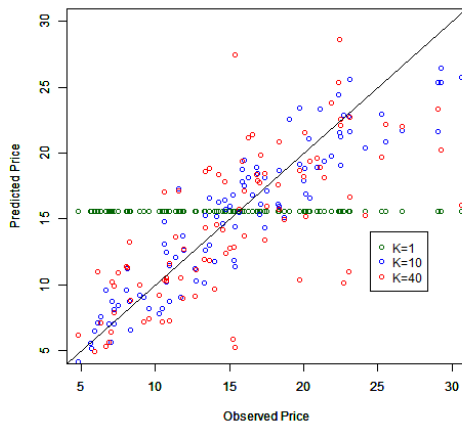
and calculate the MSE

$$\widehat{MSE}_{te} = \frac{1}{N_{te}} \sum_{i=1}^{N_{te}} (Y_{i,te} - \hat{Y}_{i,te})^2.$$

MSE in Test Sample



Predicted Car Prices in Test Sample



Number of Covariates	1	10	40
MSE	45.742	8.222	46.499

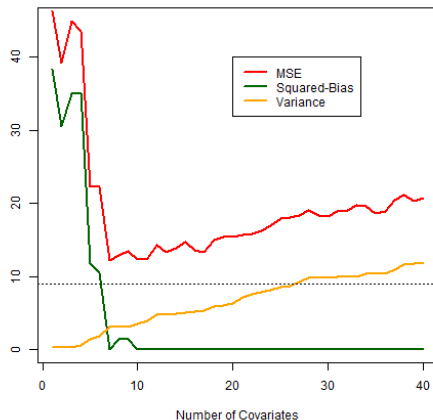
Bias-Variance Trade-Off

- ▶ When we assess the model for one randomly drawn individual from the test sample with fixed characteristics x_{te} , then we can decompose the MSE to

$$\begin{aligned}MSE_{te} &= E[(Y_{te} - \hat{Y}_{te})^2] \\&= E[(f(x_{te}) + \epsilon_{te} - \hat{f}_{tr}(x_{te}))^2] \\&= \underbrace{E[(f(x_{te}) - \hat{f}_{tr}(x_{te}))^2]}_{\text{Reducible}} + \underbrace{Var(\epsilon_{te})}_{\text{Irreducible}} \\&= \underbrace{E[f(x_{te}) - \hat{f}_{tr}(x_{te})]^2}_{\text{Squared-Bias}} + \underbrace{Var(\hat{f}_{tr}(x_{te}))}_{\text{Variance}} + Var(\epsilon_{te})\end{aligned}$$

- ▶ For i.i.d. data, $\hat{f}_{tr}(\cdot)$ and ϵ_{te} are independent of each other.

Simulation of Bias-Variance Trade-Off



- Only the first ten covariate have an impact on car prices in the simulation.
- Horizontal dashed line is the simulated noise $Var(\epsilon_{te})$.

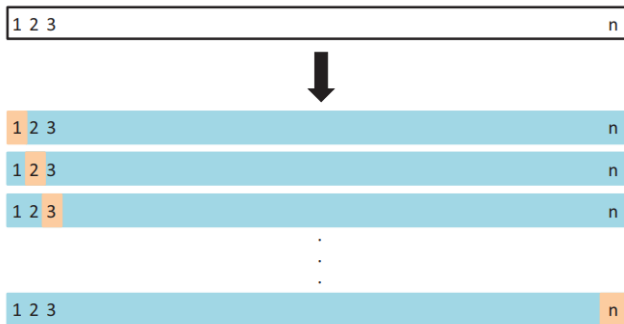
Lasso Example

$$\arg \min_{\beta} \left\{ \sum_{i=1}^N \left(Y_i - \beta_0 - \sum_{j=1}^p X_{ij} \beta_j \right)^2 + \lambda \sum_{j=1}^p |\beta_j| \right\}$$

	OLS	Lasso
Intercept	21.246	22.776
diesel	2.075	.
other_car_owner	0.730	.
pm_green	1.635	.
private_seller	6.100	0.076
guarantee	-2.440	-0.437
inspection	-0.813	.
maintenance_cert	1.481	.
mileage	-0.049	-0.031
age_car_years	-1.291	-1.012
R^2 training	0.655	0.543
R^2 test	0.606	0.611

Selection of Optimal Penalty Parameter

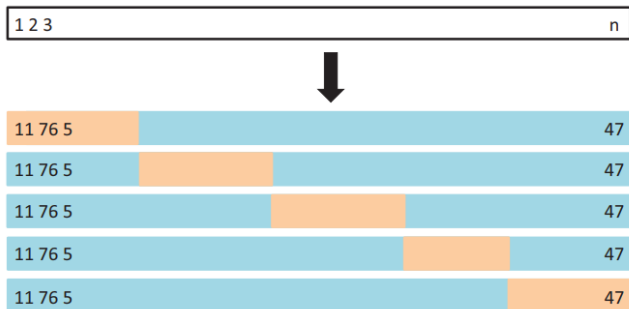
Leave-One-Out Cross-Validation



Source: James et al. (2013), p. 179

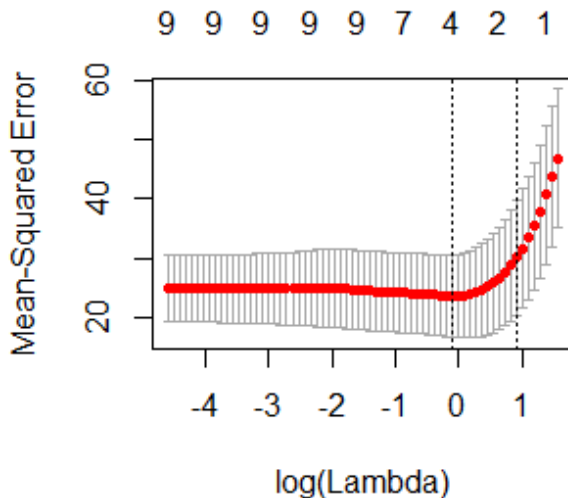
Selection of Optimal Penalty Parameter

k-fold Cross-Validation (CV) Algorithm



Source: James et al. (2013), p. 181

Cross-Validated MSE



Stability of the Lasso Model

	Lasso 1	Lasso 2	Lasso 3	Lasso 4	Lasso 5
Intercept	22.776	25.947	24.937	27.309	25.116
diesel	.	.	2.387	.	0.886
other_car_owner	.	-1.257	0.393	.	.
pm_green	.	2.871	.	.	.
private_seller	0.076	5.094	.	-1.037	.
guarantee	-0.437	1.677	15.939	.	.
inspection	.	-0.666	-0.374	.	.
maintenance_cert	.	-2.579	-0.868	.	.
mileage	-0.031	-0.037	-0.041	-0.069	-0.062
age_car_years	-1.012	-1.347	-1.416	-0.874	-1.115

- We do not learn the “true” structural model from ML
- ML is a black-box approach

Stability of the Lasso Predictions

Correlation of Predicted Car Prices in Test Sample:

	Lasso 1	Lasso 2	Lasso 3	Lasso 4
Lasso 2	0.94			
Lasso 3	0.85	0.81		
Lasso 4	0.97	0.91	0.85	
Lasso 5	0.99	0.94	0.87	0.99

When could Predictions be Useful?

Tasks with a prediction purpose:

- ▶ Predict stock or commodity prices using Twitter data.
- ▶ Nowcasting unemployment rate or GDP using Google search queries.
- ▶ Pre-screening of job applications.
- ▶ Consumer demand (shipping before the order occurs).
- ▶ Movie recommendations on Netflix.
- ▶ Handwriting, image, face, or voice recognition.

Examples of Business and Economic Studies

Prediction Tasks:

- ▶ [Chandler, Levitt, and List \(2011\)](#) predict shootings among high-risk youth to target mentoring interventions.
- ▶ [Kleinberg, et al. \(2018\)](#) predict the crime probability of defendants released from investigative custody to improve judge decisions.

Pre-Processing Unstructured Data:

- ▶ [Glaeser et al. \(2016\)](#) use images from Google Street View to measure block-level income in New York City and Boston.
- ▶ [Kang et al. \(2013\)](#) use restaurant reviews on Yelp.com to predict the outcome of hygiene inspections.
- ▶ [Kogan et al. \(2009\)](#) predict volatility of firms from market-risk disclosure texts (annual 10-K forms).

Predictions vs. Causal Inference

- ▶ Outcome (e.g., earnings): Y
 - ▶ Binary Treatment (e.g., participation in training program):
 $D \in \{0, 1\}$
 - ▶ Potential Outcome:
 - ▶ $Y(1)$ potential earnings under participation
 - ▶ $Y(0)$ potential earnings under non-participation
 - Only one potential earnings can be observed
 - ▶ Causal effect: $\delta = Y(1) - Y(0)$
- Predictions have the observable estimation target \hat{Y}
- Causal inference has the (partly) unobservable estimation target $\hat{\delta}$

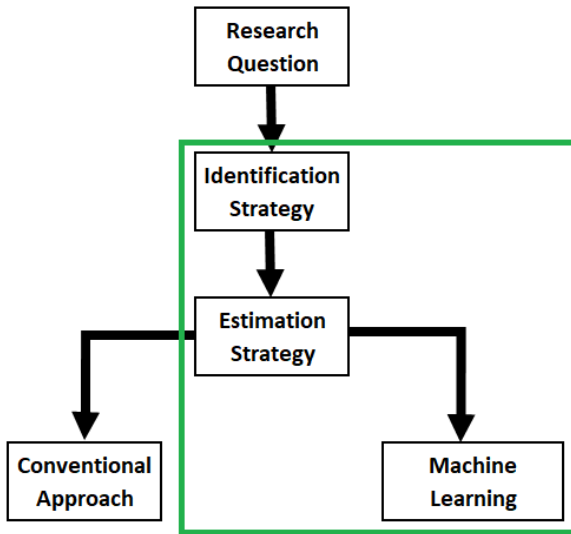
Training of ML Algorithms

Out-of-Sample Mean-Squared-Error (MSE):

$$MSE_{\hat{\delta}} = E \left[(\hat{\delta} - \delta)^2 \right] = \underbrace{E \left[(\hat{\delta} - E[\hat{\delta}])^2 \right]}_{\text{Variance}} + \underbrace{E[\hat{\delta} - \delta]^2}_{\text{Squared Bias}}$$

→ δ is unobservable

Research Design



Potentials of Causal Machine Learning (CML)

Four potential applications of CML:

1. Account for (very) many instruments in IV or Heckit approach (prediction problem, issues with inference).

References:

- ▶ [Belloni, Chen, Chernozhukov, and Hansen \(2012\)](#)
- ▶ [Hansen and Kozbur \(2014\)](#)

2. Account for confounders, e.g., in matching, IV, or difference-in-difference approaches:

- ▶ ML enables the incorporation of (very) many covariates which can make the exclusion restriction more credible.
- ▶ Some ML approaches make little functional form assumptions.

Reference:

- ▶ [Chernozhukov et al. \(2017\)](#)

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Potentials of Causal Machine Learning (CML)

3. Heterogeneous effects:

- ▶ Principled approach makes it less likely to overlook important heterogeneity.
- ▶ Problems: Issues with interpretability and works only for the low-dimensional case.

References:

- ▶ [Wager and Athey \(2018\)](#)
- ▶ [Chernozhukov, Demirer, Duflo, and Fernández-Val \(2018\)](#)

4. Optimal policy rules (e.g. Bandits):

- ▶ Focus on the (discrete) treatment decision instead on the effect size.

Reference:

- ▶ [Athey and Wager \(2019\)](#)

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Limitations of Causal Machine Learning (CML)

- ▶ ML algorithms cannot distinguish between causation and correlation.
 - CML will not select the relevant causal parameters automatically.
 - We have to provide some structure to the CML algorithm.
- ▶ CML can estimate causal effects only for a few (usually only one) endogenous variables.
 - We will not obtain the (complete) structural model.
- ▶ Identifying assumptions do not change, no matter if we use ML or conventional methods.
- ▶ We should resist the temptation to interpret prediction models in a causal way.

Applications of CML Methods

- ▶ [Davis and Heller \(2017\)](#) investigate the effects of summer jobs on the probability to commit a violent crime.
- ▶ [Taddy et al. \(2016\)](#) investigate the heterogeneous effects of A/B-experiments in online-auctions (EBay) on customer responses (experimental study).
- ▶ [Bertrand et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Knaus, Lechner, and Strittmatter \(2020\)](#) estimate heterogeneous employment effects of training programmes for unemployed persons.