

Max Flow Problem

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Linear Programming Final Project

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Flow Network Definition

Let $G = (V, E)$ be a directed graph and with source and sink vertices $s, t \in V$.

Assign each edge $e \in E$ a capacity $c(e)$, the maximum amount of flow that can go across an edge.

A flow is function that assigns each edge a weight such that:

for every $v \in V \setminus \{s, t\}$, the flow into v is equal to the flow out of v

the flow on each edge can not exceed the edge capacity

Max Flow Problem Statement

Value of a flow. For a flow f , its value is

$$\text{val}(f) = \sum_{e \text{ out of } s} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } s} f(e).$$

Maximum flow problem. Find a feasible flow f of maximum value among all flows in the network. That is,

maximize $\text{val}(f)$ subject to $0 \leq f(e) \leq c(e)$ and flow conservation.

Max Flow Problem as an LP

$$\text{maximize} \quad \sum_{v:(s,v) \in E} f_{sv}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{s.t.} \quad & \sum_{v:(u,v) \in E} f_{uv} - \sum_{v:(v,u) \in E} f_{vu} = 0, \quad \forall u \in V \setminus \{s, t\}, \\ & 0 \leq f_{uv} \leq c_{uv}, \quad \forall (u, v) \in E. \end{aligned}$$

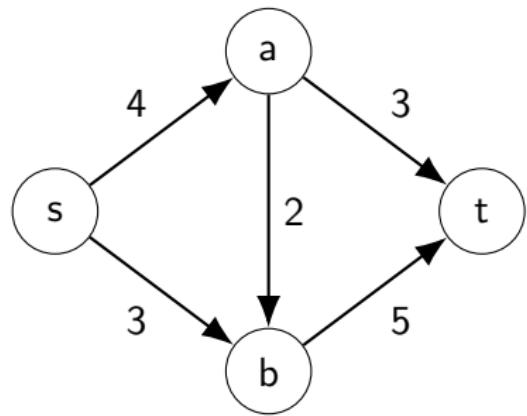
f_{uv} is the flow from u to v

Objective function maximizes flow out of s

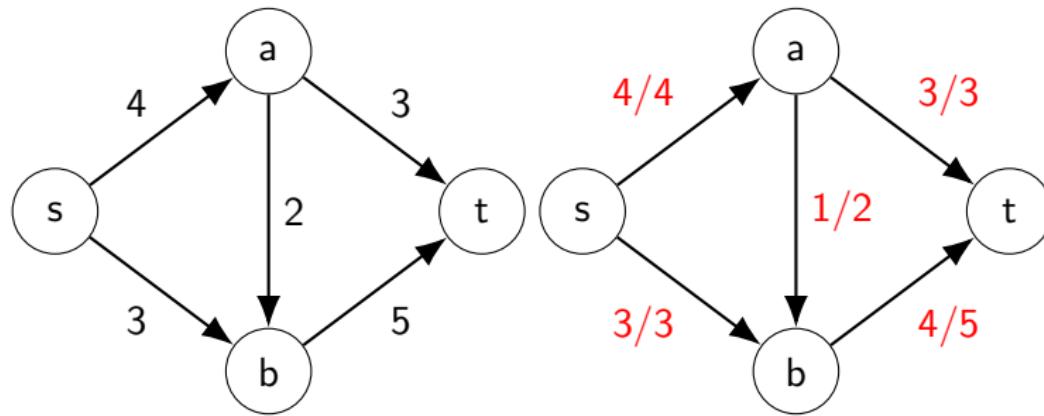
First constraint forces a zero net flow on vertices excepting s and t

Second constraint ensures flow on each edge is nonnegative and does not exceed the edge's capacity

Max Flow Example



Max Flow Example

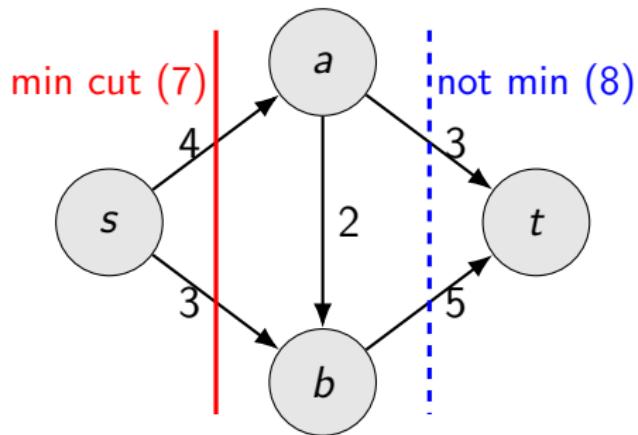


In this example, the maximum flow is 7.

Min Cut Problem Statement

An $s-t$ cut is a node partition (S, T) such that $s \in S$ and $t \in T$.

The capacity of a cut (S, T) is the sum of the weights of edges leaving S .



Min cut problem:
Find an $s-t$ cut of minimum capacity

Min Cut Problem as an IP

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{minimize} && \sum_{(u,v) \in E} c_{uv} z_{uv} \\ & \text{subject to} && z_{uv} \geq x_v - x_u, \quad \forall (u, v) \in E, \\ & && x_s = 0, \quad x_t = 1, \\ & && x_v \in \{0, 1\}, \quad \forall v \in V, \\ & && z_{uv} \in \{0, 1\}, \quad \forall (u, v) \in E. \end{aligned}$$

c_{uv} : weight of an edge from u to v

z_{uv} : binary variable equal to 1 if $u \in S$ and $v \in T$, and 0 otherwise

x_v : binary variable equal to 0 if $v \in S$, and 1 if $v \in T$

Max Flow Min Cut Theorem

Theorem

The value of a max flow is equal to the capacity of a min cut.

Intuition:

Every flow must go through the smallest 'bottleneck'
(capacity of the min cut).

The max flow uses the full capacity of the min cut.

Flow Value Lemma

Flow value lemma. Let f be any flow and let (S, T) be any cut. Then, the value of the flow f equals the net flow across the cut (S, T) .

$$\text{val}(f) = \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } S} f(e)$$

Proof.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{val}(f) &= \sum_{e \text{ out of } s} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } s} f(e) \\ &= \sum_{v \in S} \left(\sum_{e \text{ out of } v} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } v} f(e) \right) \\ &= \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } S} f(e)\end{aligned}$$

The second equality comes from the fact that net flow through any vertex other than s or t is equal to 0.

Weak Duality

Weak Duality: Let f be a flow and (S, T) be any $s-t$ cut.

Then the value of f is at most the capacity of (S, T) .

Proof. The **net flow** sent across the cut is equal to the amount reaching t . Therefore,

$$\text{val}(f) = \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } S} f(e) \leq \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} f(e) = \text{cap}(S, T)$$

Max Flow Min Cut: Proof

Optimality: If the value of a flow f equals the capacity of a cut (S, T) , then f is a max flow and (S, T) is a min cut.

Proof. Using weak duality:

For any flow f' , we have $\text{val}(f') \leq \text{cap}(S, T) = \text{val}(f)$.

For any cut (S', T') , we have

$\text{cap}(S', T') \geq \text{val}(f) = \text{cap}(S, T)$.

Max Flow Min Cut Proof

Complete the proof of the Max Flow Min Cut Theorem by proving these three conditions are equivalent for any flow f :

- i. There exists a cut (S, T) such that $\text{cap}(S, T) = \text{val}(f)$.
- ii. f is a max flow.
- iii. There is no augmenting path for f .

Proof of $i \Rightarrow ii$: By optimality and weak duality.

Proof of $ii \Rightarrow iii$: By contradiction. If an augmenting path exists for f , then f is not a max flow.

Max Flow Min Cut Proof

- i. There exists a cut (S, T) such that $\text{cap}(S, T) = \text{val}(f)$.
- ii. f is a max flow.
- iii. There is no augmenting path for f .

Proof of *iii* \Rightarrow *i*: Let f be a flow with no augmenting paths, and S be the set of vertices reachable from S . Then $s \in S$, and $t \notin S$ (otherwise there would be some augmenting path). Then

$$\begin{aligned}\text{val}(f) &= \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} f(e) - \sum_{e \text{ into } S} f(e) \\ &= \sum_{e \text{ out of } S} c(e) - 0 \\ &= \text{cap}(S, T)\end{aligned}$$

Some Graph Theory Definitions

Let $G = (V, E)$ be an undirected graph and let $s, t \in V$ be two non-adjacent vertices.

Definition

An **edge cut** of G is a subset of E whose deletion results in a disconnected graph.

Definition

Two paths are **pairwise edge disjoint** if they have no edges in common.

Definition

Let $\kappa'(s, t)$ be the size of the minimum edge-cut such that there is no path between s and t .

Definition

Let $\lambda'(s, t)$ be the maximum number of pairwise edge disjoint paths between s and t .

Menger's Theorem

Theorem

Let $G = (V, E)$ be an undirected graph and let $s, t \in V$ be two non-adjacent vertices. Then $\kappa'(s, t) = \lambda'(s, t)$.

Proof Sketch:

Form the directed graph G' from G by replacing every edge $uv \in E$ with two directed edges $u \rightarrow v$ and $v \rightarrow u$. Each edge in G' has capacity 1.

By definition, $\kappa'(s, t) \geq \lambda'(s, t)$.

Menger's Theorem Proof Sketch

A minimum capacity cut of G' partitions vertices into parts S and T such that $s \in S$ and $t \in T$. $\text{min-cut}(G') = \text{the number of edges from } S \text{ to } T \text{ in } G \geq \kappa'(s, t)$.

By the Max Flow Min Cut Theorem, there exists a max flow f such that $\text{val}(f) = \text{max-flow}(G') = \text{min-cut}(G')$. If f assigns nonzero flow to two oppositely directed edges, assign both 0 instead which guarantees we only use each edge from G in one direction. There are $\text{min-cut}(G')$ many unit flow paths from s to t . These must be disjoint, otherwise we violate the conservation condition. So, f gives $\text{min-cut}(G')$ many pairwise edge disjoint paths which implies $\lambda'(s, t) \geq \text{max-flow}(G')$.

$$\begin{aligned}\lambda'(s, t) &\geq \text{max-flow}(G') = \text{min-cut}(G') \geq \kappa'(s, t) \implies \\ \lambda'(s, t) &\geq \kappa'(s, t).\end{aligned}$$

Greedy Implementation

Greedy algorithm:

Start with $f(e) = 0$ for each edge $e \in E$.

Find an $s \rightarrow t$ path P where each edge has open capacity, i.e.
 $f(e) < c(e)$.

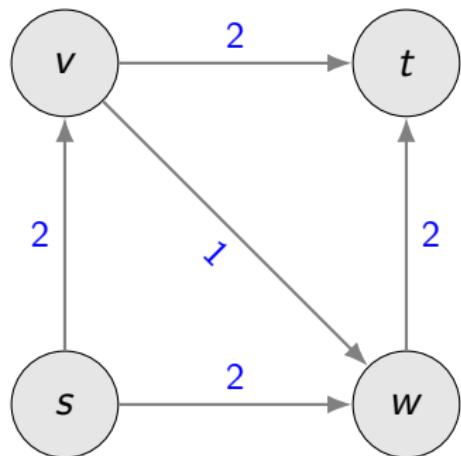
Augment flow along P .

Repeat until no such path exists.

Problems with Greedy Implementation

Problem: A bad order of path choices can lead to a sub-maximum flow.

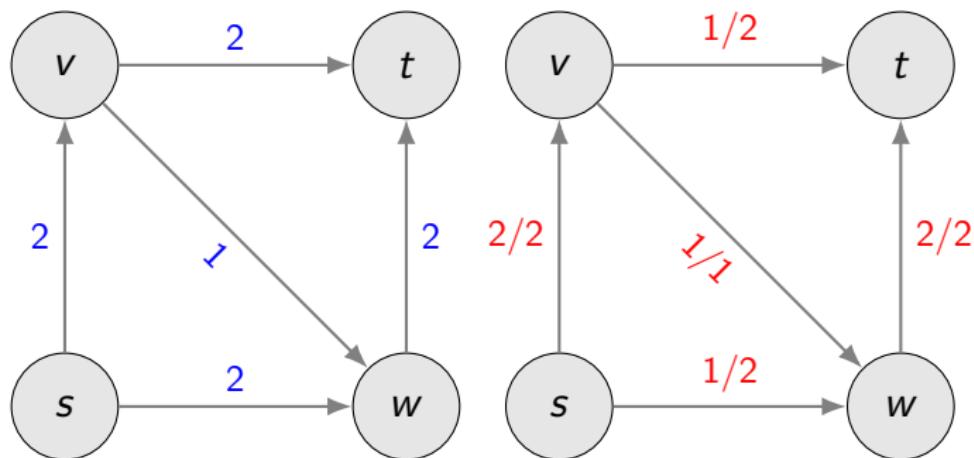
Example: Choosing $s \rightarrow v \rightarrow w \rightarrow t$ as a first path results in a submaximal flow.



Problems with Greedy Implementation

Problem: A bad order of path choices can lead to a sub-maximum flow.

Example: Choosing $s \rightarrow v \rightarrow w \rightarrow t$ as a first path results in a submaximal flow.



Solution: Residual Flow Network

Residual capacity: For an edge (u, v) with capacity $c(u, v)$ and current flow $f(u, v)$, the *residual capacity* is

$$c_f(u, v) = c(u, v) - f(u, v).$$

Backward edges: If $f(u, v) > 0$, we add a backward edge (v, u) with residual capacity

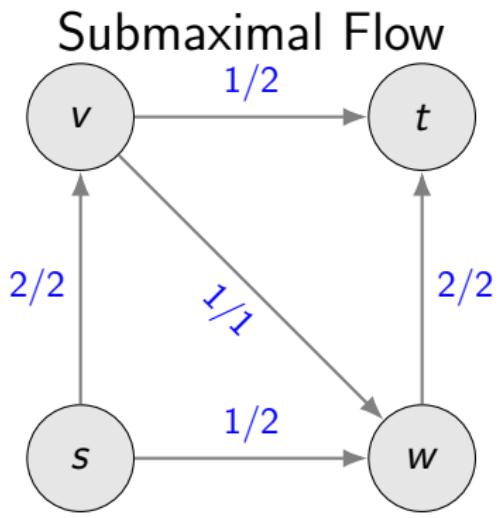
$$c_f(v, u) = f(u, v).$$

The fix:

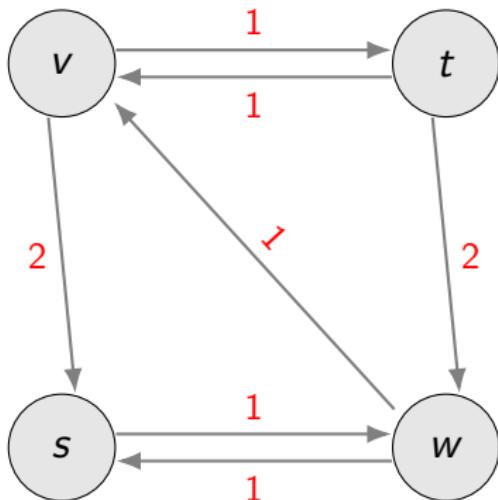
Forward edges let us send more flow.

Backward edges let us *undo* previously sent flow.

Residual Flow Example



Residual Flow Network



Ford-Fulkerson Runtime and Implementations

General Ford-Fulkerson Algorithm:

Start with $f(e) = 0$ for each edge $e \in E$.

Build residual flow network.

Find an $s \rightarrow t$ path P where each edge has open capacity, i.e.
 $f(e) < c(e)$ (using BFS or other method).

Augment flow along P , and update residual flow network.

Repeat until no such path exists.

Runtime and Implementation

Generally solves much faster than solving as an LP/IP

For a graph $G = (V, E)$ with integral capacities at most c ,
the runtime is $c|V|$.

Can be improved by carefully choosing augmenting paths
based on length and size of bottleneck capacity.

Fast implementation in networkx library in Python

Applications

Applications of the Max Flow Problem:

Network Connectivity: Finding the maximum number of disjoint paths between two nodes.

Bipartite Matching: Reducing maximum matching problems to a flow network.

Circulation Problems: Optimizing flow with demands and supplies.

Project Selection / Scheduling: Modeling tasks and resource allocation.

Image Segmentation: Graph cuts in computer vision.

Transportation / Logistics: Optimizing traffic, shipping, and pipeline networks.

Min-Cut Analysis: Identifying bottlenecks in networks.

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