

If I break a stick of unit length into 2 pieces, what is the average size of the smaller piece? What is the average ratio of the smaller length to the larger length?

We only require one break to obtain 2 fragments. Say the break occurs at $x \in [0, 1]$. The break is just as likely to be in the left hand half as the right. If the break occurs within $[0, 1/2]$ then the smallest length is x , otherwise it is $1 - x$. Therefore, Let L be random variable, the length of the smallest piece, then

$$L = \begin{cases} x & \text{for } x \in [0, 1/2] \\ 1 - x & \text{for } x \in [1/2, 1] \end{cases}$$

Therefore

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbb{E}(L) &= \int_0^{1/2} x \, dx + \int_{1/2}^1 (1 - x) \, dx \\ &= [1/2x^2]_0^{1/2} + [x - 1/2x^2]_{1/2}^1 \\ &= \frac{1}{8} + \left(1 - \frac{1}{2}\right) - \left(\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{8}\right) = \frac{2}{8} = \frac{1}{4} \end{aligned}$$

To answer the second part, when $x > 1/2$ the smallest length is given by $1 - x$, and vice versa. Therefore

$$E = \int_{1/2}^1 \frac{1 - x}{x} \, dx + \int_0^{1/2} \frac{x}{1 - x} \, dx$$

is the expected average ratio. Regarding the second integral

$$\begin{aligned} I &= \int_0^{1/2} \frac{x}{1 - x} \, dx \\ &\text{by making the change of variable } x \rightarrow 1 - y \implies dx = -dy \\ &\text{with limits } x = 0 \rightarrow y = 1, \quad x = 1/2 \rightarrow y = 1/2 \\ I &= \int_1^{1/2} -\frac{1 - y}{y} \, dy = \int_{1/2}^1 \frac{1 - y}{y} \, dy \end{aligned}$$

Therefore

$$E = 2 \int_{1/2}^1 \frac{1 - x}{x} \, dx = 2[\log x - x]_{1/2}^1 = 2[(0 - 1) - (\log 2 - 1/2)] = 2 \log 2 - 1 \approx 0.39$$