

# Subgradient Methods

- subgradient method and stepsize rules
- convergence results and proof
- optimal step size and alternating projections
- speeding up subgradient methods

# Subgradient method

**subgradient method** is simple algorithm to minimize nondifferentiable convex function  $f$

$$x^{(k+1)} = x^{(k)} - \alpha_k g^{(k)}$$

- $x^{(k)}$  is the  $k$ th iterate
- $g^{(k)}$  is **any** subgradient of  $f$  at  $x^{(k)}$
- $\alpha_k > 0$  is the  $k$ th step size

not a descent method, so we keep track of best point so far

$$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} = \min_{i=1, \dots, k} f(x^{(i)})$$

## Step size rules

step sizes are fixed ahead of time

- *constant step size*:  $\alpha_k = \alpha$  (constant)
- *constant step length*:  $\alpha_k = \gamma / \|g^{(k)}\|_2$  (so  $\|x^{(k+1)} - x^{(k)}\|_2 = \gamma$ )
- *square summable but not summable*: step sizes satisfy

$$\sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \alpha_k^2 < \infty, \quad \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \alpha_k = \infty$$

- *nonsummable diminishing*: step sizes satisfy

$$\lim_{k \rightarrow \infty} \alpha_k = 0, \quad \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \alpha_k = \infty$$

## Assumptions

- $f^\star = \inf_x f(x) > -\infty$ , with  $f(x^\star) = f^\star$
- $\|g\|_2 \leq G$  for all  $g \in \partial f$  (equivalent to Lipschitz condition on  $f$ )
- $\|x^{(1)} - x^\star\|_2 \leq R$

these assumptions are stronger than needed, just to simplify proofs

## Convergence results

define  $\bar{f} = \lim_{k \rightarrow \infty} f_{\text{best}}^{(k)}$

- *constant step size:*  $\bar{f} - f^* \leq G^2\alpha/2$ , *i.e.*,  
**converges to  $G^2\alpha/2$ -suboptimal**  
(converges to  $f^*$  if  $f$  differentiable,  $\alpha$  small enough)
- *constant step length:*  $\bar{f} - f^* \leq G\gamma/2$ , *i.e.*,  
**converges to  $G\gamma/2$ -suboptimal**
- *diminishing step size rule:*  $\bar{f} = f^*$ , *i.e.*, **converges**

## Convergence proof

**key quantity:** *Euclidean distance to the optimal set*, not the function value

let  $x^*$  be any minimizer of  $f$

$$\begin{aligned}\|x^{(k+1)} - x^*\|_2^2 &= \|x^{(k)} - \alpha_k g^{(k)} - x^*\|_2^2 \\ &= \|x^{(k)} - x^*\|_2^2 - 2\alpha_k g^{(k)T}(x^{(k)} - x^*) + \alpha_k^2 \|g^{(k)}\|_2^2 \\ &\leq \|x^{(k)} - x^*\|_2^2 - 2\alpha_k (f(x^{(k)}) - f^*) + \alpha_k^2 \|g^{(k)}\|_2^2\end{aligned}$$

using  $f^* = f(x^*) \geq f(x^{(k)}) + g^{(k)T}(x^* - x^{(k)})$

apply recursively to get

$$\begin{aligned}\|x^{(k+1)} - x^*\|_2^2 &\leq \|x^{(1)} - x^*\|_2^2 - 2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i (f(x^{(i)}) - f^*) + \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2 \|g^{(i)}\|_2^2 \\ &\leq R^2 - 2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i (f(x^{(i)}) - f^*) + G^2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2\end{aligned}$$

now we use

$$\sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i (f(x^{(i)}) - f^*) \geq (f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^*) \left( \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i \right)$$

to get

$$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^* \leq \frac{R^2 + G^2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2}{2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i}.$$

**constant step size:** for  $\alpha_k = \alpha$  we get

$$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^* \leq \frac{R^2 + G^2 k \alpha^2}{2k\alpha}$$

righthand side converges to  $G^2\alpha/2$  as  $k \rightarrow \infty$

**constant step length:** for  $\alpha_k = \gamma/\|g^{(k)}\|_2$  we get

$$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^* \leq \frac{R^2 + \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2 \|g^{(i)}\|_2^2}{2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i} \leq \frac{R^2 + \gamma^2 k}{2\gamma k/G},$$

righthand side converges to  $G\gamma/2$  as  $k \rightarrow \infty$



**square summable but not summable step sizes:**  
suppose step sizes satisfy

$$\sum_{i=1}^{\infty} \alpha_k^2 < \infty, \quad \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \alpha_k = \infty$$

then

$$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^* \leq \frac{R^2 + G^2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2}{2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i}$$

as  $k \rightarrow \infty$ , numerator converges to a finite number, denominator converges to  $\infty$ , so  $f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} \rightarrow f^*$

## Stopping criterion

- terminating when  $\frac{R^2 + G^2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2}{2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i} \leq \epsilon$  is really, really, slow
- optimal choice of  $\alpha_i$  to achieve  $\frac{R^2 + G^2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i^2}{2 \sum_{i=1}^k \alpha_i} \leq \epsilon$  for smallest  $k$ :

$$\alpha_i = (R/G)/\sqrt{k}, \quad i = 1, \dots, k$$

number of steps required:  $k = (RG/\epsilon)^2$

- the truth: there really isn't a good stopping criterion for the subgradient method . . .

## Example: Piecewise linear minimization

$$\text{minimize } f(x) = \max_{i=1,\dots,m} (a_i^T x + b_i)$$

to find a subgradient of  $f$ : find index  $j$  for which

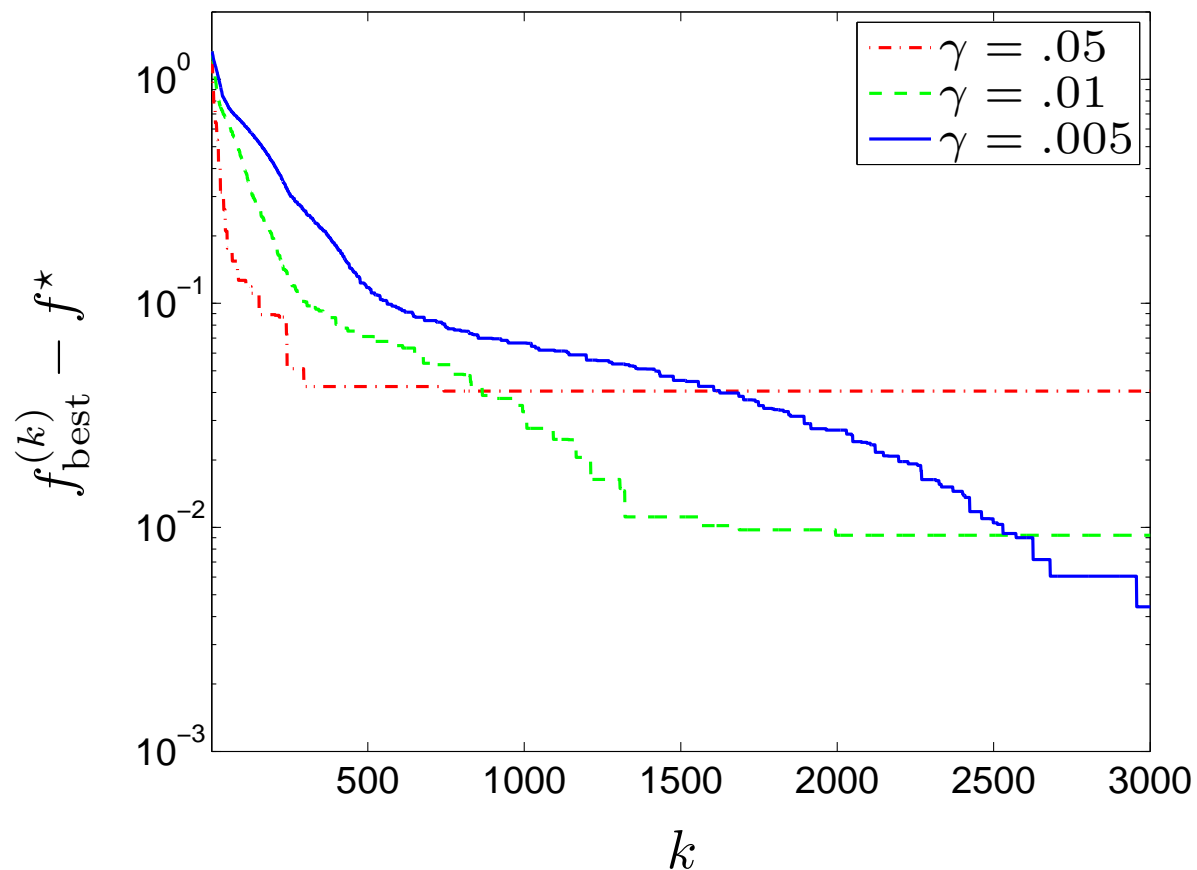
$$a_j^T x + b_j = \max_{i=1,\dots,m} (a_i^T x + b_i)$$

and take  $g = a_j$

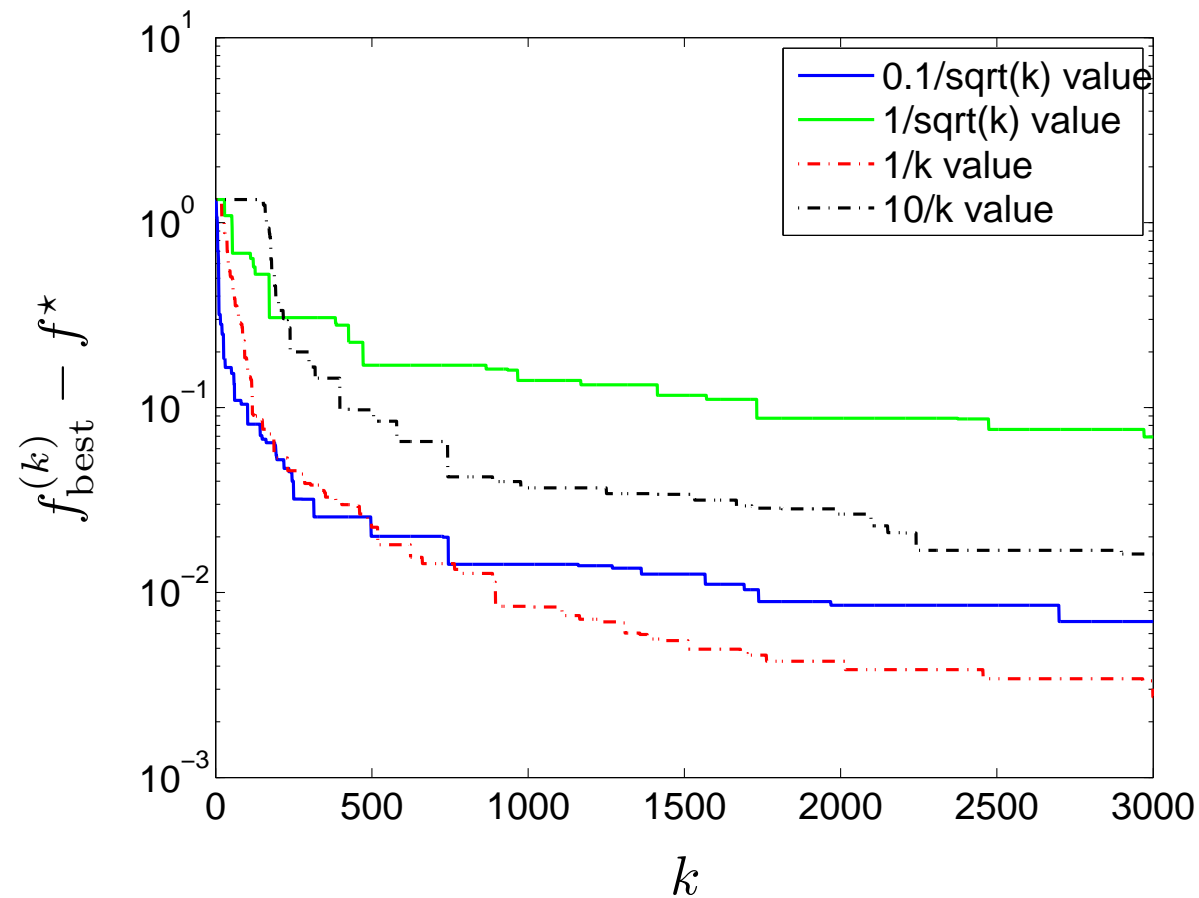
subgradient method:  $x^{(k+1)} = x^{(k)} - \alpha_k a_j$

problem instance with  $n = 20$  variables,  $m = 100$  terms,  $f^* \approx 1.1$

$f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - f^*$ , constant step length  $\gamma = 0.05, 0.01, 0.005$



diminishing step rules  $\alpha_k = 0.1/\sqrt{k}$  and  $\alpha_k = 1/\sqrt{k}$ , square summable  
step size rules  $\alpha_k = 1/k$  and  $\alpha_k = 10/k$



## Optimal step size when $f^\star$ is known

- choice due to Polyak:

$$\alpha_k = \frac{f(x^{(k)}) - f^\star}{\|g^{(k)}\|_2^2}$$

(can also use when optimal value is estimated)

- motivation: start with basic inequality

$$\|x^{(k+1)} - x^\star\|_2^2 \leq \|x^{(k)} - x^\star\|_2^2 - 2\alpha_k(f(x^{(k)}) - f^\star) + \alpha_k^2\|g^{(k)}\|_2^2$$

and choose  $\alpha_k$  to minimize righthand side

- yields

$$\|x^{(k+1)} - x^*\|_2^2 \leq \|x^{(k)} - x^*\|_2^2 - \frac{(f(x^{(k)}) - f^*)^2}{\|g^{(k)}\|_2^2}$$

(in particular,  $\|x^{(k)} - x^*\|_2$  decreases each step)

- applying recursively,

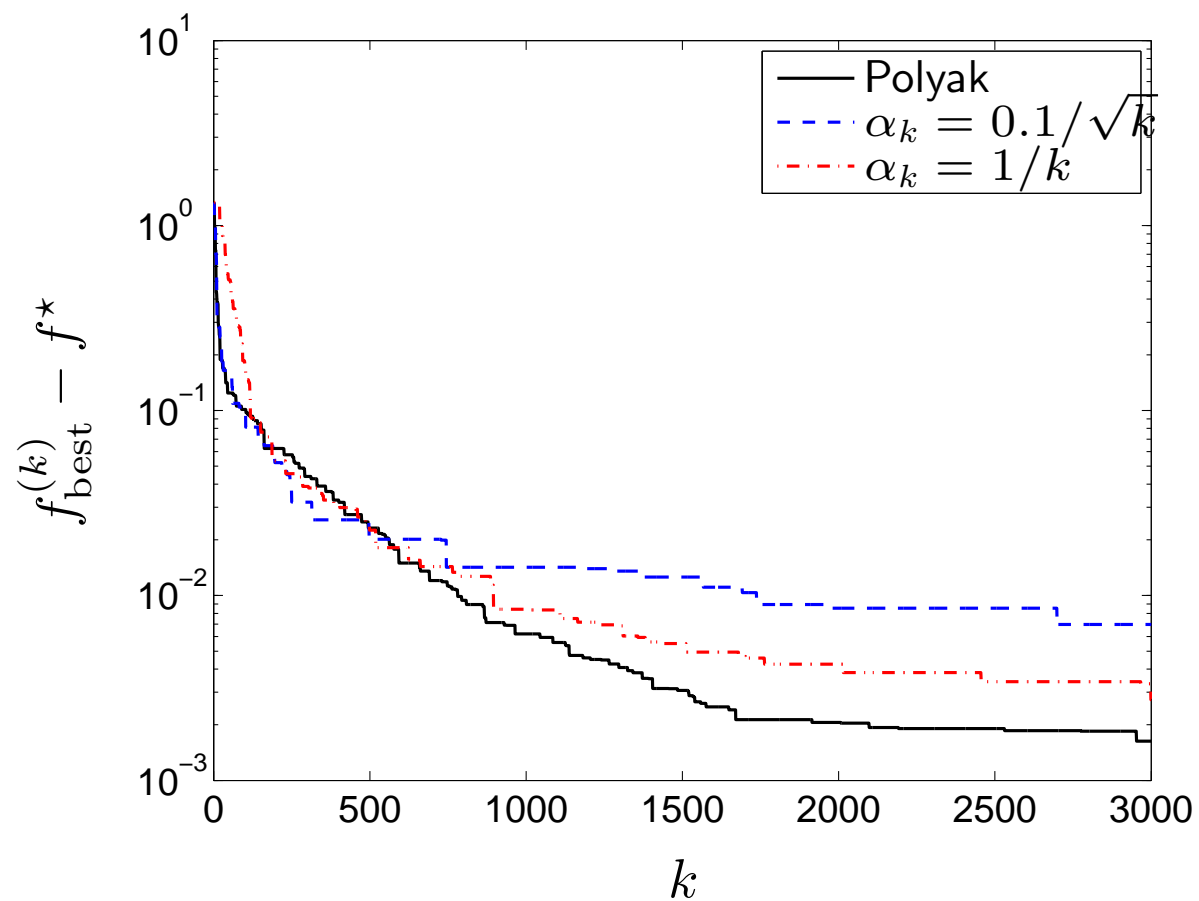
$$\sum_{i=1}^k \frac{(f(x^{(i)}) - f^*)^2}{\|g^{(i)}\|_2^2} \leq R^2$$

and so

$$\sum_{i=1}^k (f(x^{(i)}) - f^*)^2 \leq R^2 G^2$$

which proves  $f(x^{(k)}) \rightarrow f^*$

PWL example with Polyak's step size,  $\alpha_k = 0.1/\sqrt{k}$ ,  $\alpha_k = 1/k$





## Finding a point in the intersection of convex sets

$C = C_1 \cap \dots \cap C_m$  is nonempty,  $C_1, \dots, C_m \subseteq \mathbf{R}^n$  closed and convex

find a point in  $C$  by minimizing

$$f(x) = \max\{\mathbf{dist}(x, C_1), \dots, \mathbf{dist}(x, C_m)\}$$

with  $\mathbf{dist}(x, C_j) = f(x)$ , a subgradient of  $f$  is

$$g = \nabla \mathbf{dist}(x, C_j) = \frac{x - P_{C_j}(x)}{\|x - P_{C_j}(x)\|_2}$$

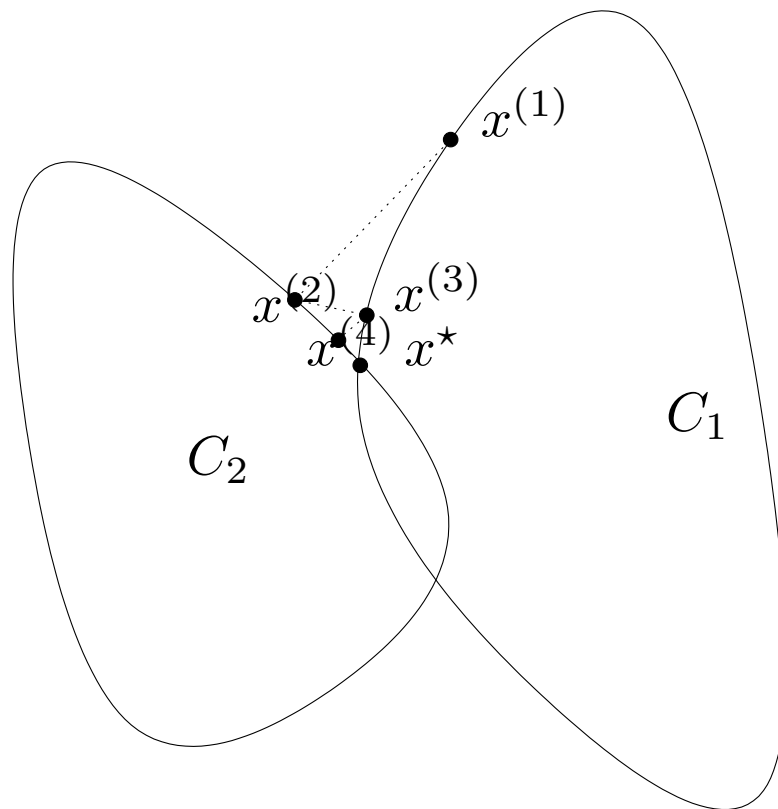
subgradient update with optimal step size:

$$\begin{aligned}x^{(k+1)} &= x^{(k)} - \alpha_k g^{(k)} \\&= x^{(k)} - f(x^{(k)}) \frac{x - P_{C_j}(x)}{\|x - P_{C_j}(x)\|_2} \\&= P_{C_j}(x^{(k)})\end{aligned}$$

- a version of the famous *alternating projections* algorithm
- at each step, project the current point onto the farthest set
- for  $m = 2$  sets, projections alternate onto one set, then the other
- convergence:  $\text{dist}(x^{(k)}, C) \rightarrow 0$  as  $k \rightarrow \infty$

# Alternating projections

first few iterations:



...  $x^{(k)}$  eventually converges to a point  $x^* \in C_1 \cap C_2$

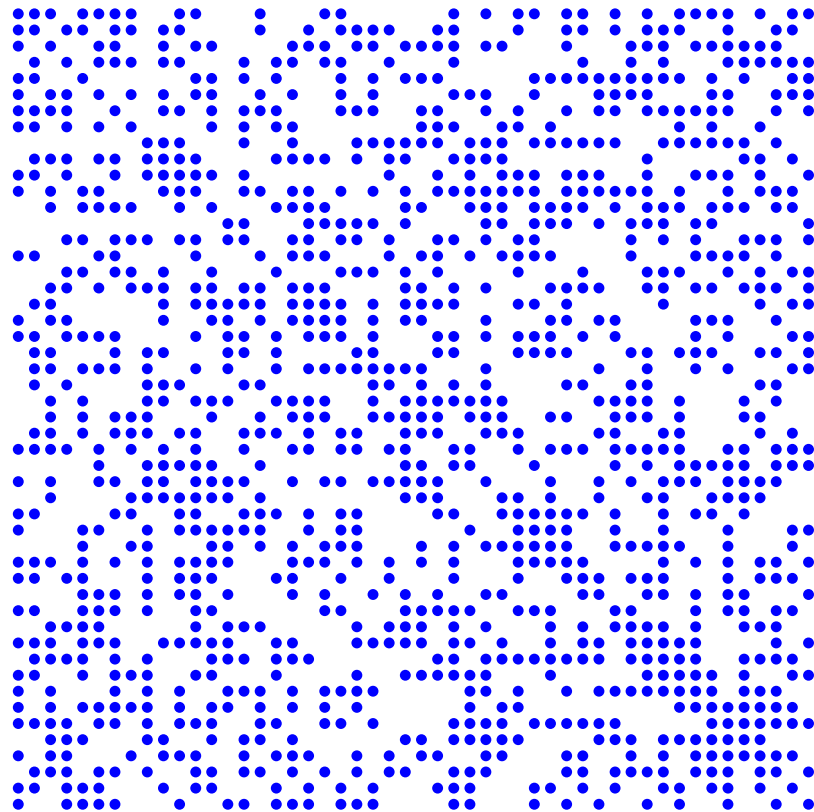
## Example: Positive semidefinite matrix completion

- some entries of matrix in  $\mathbf{S}^n$  fixed; find values for others so completed matrix is PSD
- $C_1 = \mathbf{S}_+^n$ ,  $C_2$  is (affine) set in  $\mathbf{S}^n$  with specified fixed entries
- projection onto  $C_1$  by eigenvalue decomposition, truncation: for  $X = \sum_{i=1}^n \lambda_i q_i q_i^T$ ,

$$P_{C_1}(X) = \sum_{i=1}^n \max\{0, \lambda_i\} q_i q_i^T$$

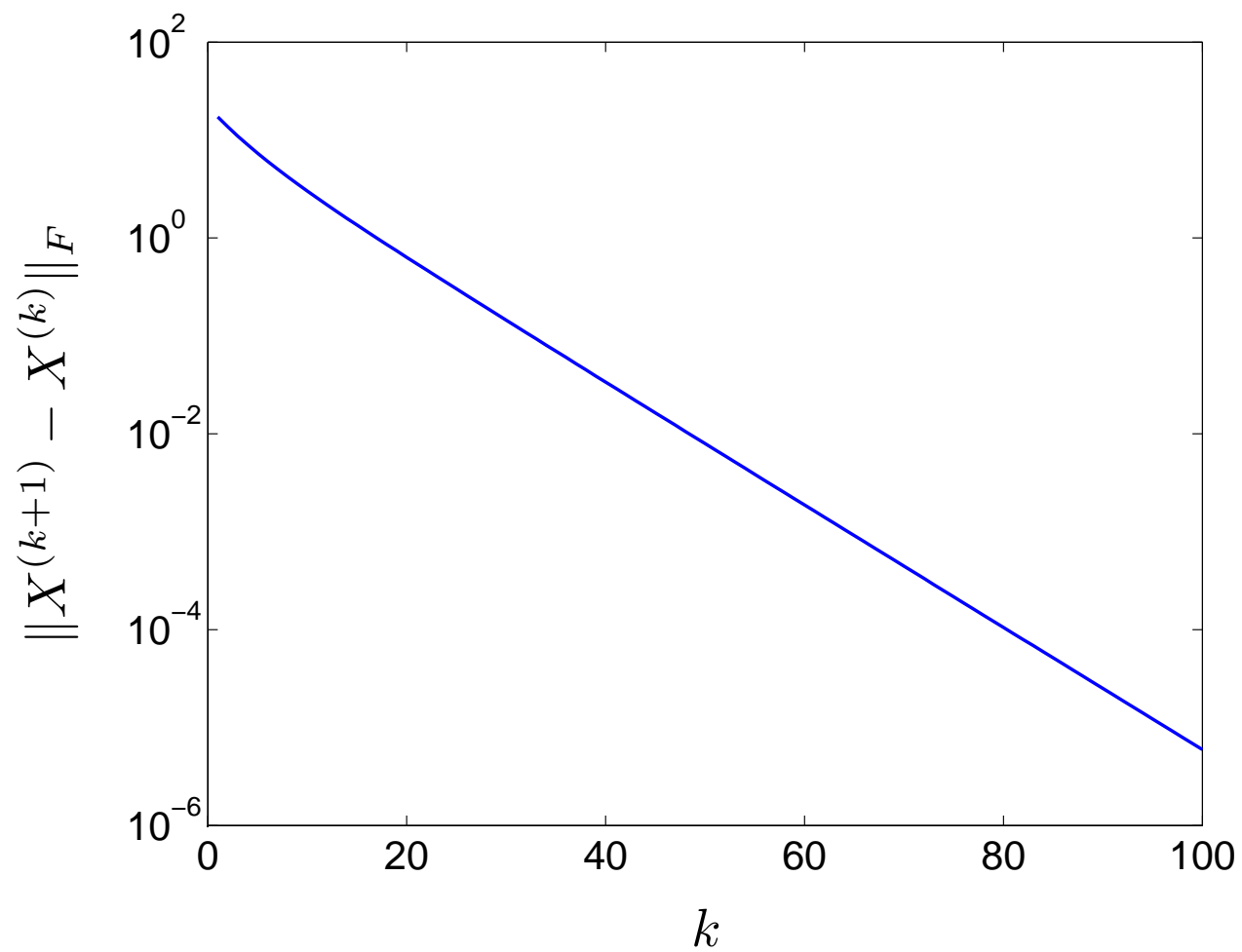
- projection of  $X$  onto  $C_2$  by re-setting specified entries to fixed values

specific example:  $50 \times 50$  matrix missing about half of its entries



- initialize  $X^{(1)}$  with unknown entries set to 0

convergence is linear:



## Polyak step size when $f^\star$ isn't known

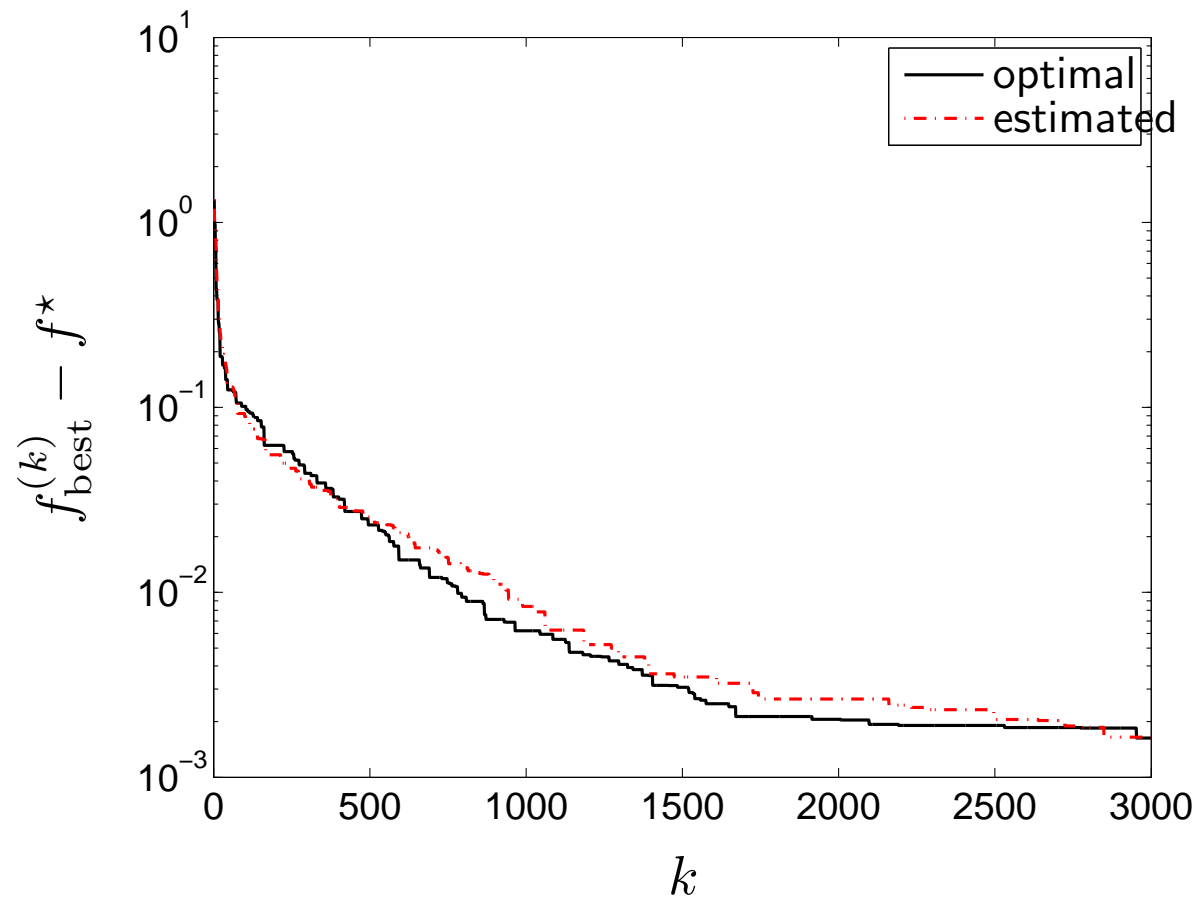
- use step size

$$\alpha_k = \frac{f(x^{(k)}) - f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} + \gamma_k}{\|g^{(k)}\|_2^2}$$

with  $\sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \gamma_k = \infty$ ,  $\sum_{k=1}^{\infty} \gamma_k^2 < \infty$

- $f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} - \gamma_k$  serves as estimate of  $f^\star$
- $\gamma_k$  is in scale of objective value
- can show  $f_{\text{best}}^{(k)} \rightarrow f^\star$

PWL example with Polyak's step size, using  $f^*$ , and estimated with  $\gamma_k = 10/(10 + k)$





## Speeding up subgradient methods

- subgradient methods are very slow
- often convergence can be improved by keeping memory of past steps

$$x^{(k+1)} = x^{(k)} - \alpha_k g^{(k)} + \beta_k (x^{(k)} - x^{(k-1)})$$

(heavy ball method)

**other ideas:** localization methods, conjugate directions, . . .

## A couple of speedup algorithms

$$x^{(k+1)} = x^{(k)} - \alpha_k s^{(k)}, \quad \alpha_k = \frac{f(x^{(k)}) - f^*}{\|s^{(k)}\|_2^2}$$

(we assume  $f^*$  is known or can be estimated)

- ‘filtered’ subgradient,  $s^{(k)} = (1 - \beta)g^{(k)} + \beta s^{(k-1)}$ , where  $\beta \in [0, 1)$
- Camerini, Fratta, and Maffioli (1975)

$$s^{(k)} = g^{(k)} + \beta_k s^{(k-1)}, \quad \beta_k = \max\{0, -\gamma_k (s^{(k-1)})^T g^{(k)} / \|s^{(k-1)}\|_2^2\}$$

where  $\gamma_k \in [0, 2)$  ( $\gamma_k = 1.5$  ‘recommended’)

PWL example, Polyak's step, filtered subgradient, CFM step

