Counting integer partitions with the method of maximum entropy

Joint work with Marcus Michelen and Will Perkins

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• **Big idea:** a different technique ("principle of maximum entropy") allows us to approach an old problem (enumerating integer partitions) with new intuition and a more powerful/flexible solution.

• Sketch of the method for a classical example (Hardy-Ramanujan asymptotic partition formula)

• Variations on the classical problem

• Our result

• Time permitting, a few ideas from the proof of one part (Local CLT)
Definition

A *partition* of a positive integer $n$ is a representation of $n$ as an unordered sum of positive integers.

Example:

- $5 + 2 + 1$ and $4 + 2 + 1 + 1$ are both partitions of 8.
- $5 + 2 + 1$ and $1 + 2 + 5$ are the *same* partition of 8.
A partition of a positive integer $n$ is a representation of $n$ as an unordered sum of positive integers.

**Question:** How many different partitions of $n$ are there? Write $P(n)$ for the set of partitions of $n$, and $p(n)$ for the number. E.g. $p(4) = 5$:

- 4
- $3 + 1$
- $2 + 2$
- $2 + 1 + 1$
- $1 + 1 + 1 + 1$
Integer partitions

Definition

A *partition* of a positive integer $n$ is a representation of $n$ as an unordered sum of positive integers.

**Problem:** How many different partitions of $n$ are there? Write $P(n)$ for the set of partitions of $n$, and $p(n)$ for the number.

For the first few values, $p(n)$ is

$$1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 15, 22, 30, 42, 56, 77, 101, 135, 176, 231, 297$$

In general, **very hard!** No closed form known.
Problem 2.0: Find asymptotic behavior of $p(n)$ as $n \to \infty$.

Theorem (Hardy and Ramanujan, 1918)

$$p(n) = \frac{1 + o(1)}{4\sqrt{3n}} e^{\pi \sqrt{\frac{2}{3} \sqrt{n}}}.$$
Theorem (Hardy and Ramanujan, 1918)

\[ p(n) = \frac{1 + o(1)}{4\sqrt{3n}} e^{\pi \sqrt{\frac{2}{3} \sqrt{n}}}. \]

**Question:** Intuitive explanation? Even just for the exponent?

- Original proof: *circle method*.
- Extract \( p(n) \) from generating function with Cauchy’s residue formula. \( \Rightarrow \) need to evaluate nasty complex integral.
- Our idea: *principle of maximum entropy*.

**Warning!** Fuzzy math ahead.
• **Probabilistic approach:** try to understand partitions of $n$ by looking at some probability distribution on partitions of *any* integer.

• Which distribution to choose?

• Jaynes’ principle of maximum entropy: “best” distribution has *maximum entropy* among all distributions that give a partition of $n$ in expectation.

• Best how?
LET'S TALK ABOUT THAT
Maximum entropy

**Definition**

Given a discrete random variable $X$, the *entropy* of $X$ is

$$H(X) := \sum_x \Pr(X = x) \log \left( \frac{1}{\Pr(X = x)} \right).$$

Measures the amount of “randomness” or “information” in $X$.

**Fact**

On a finite set $S$, the uniform distribution has the largest entropy of any distribution: $\log |S|$.

So $|S| = e^{H(X)}$ if $X$ is uniform. *Not any easier!*
Maximum entropy

**Fact:** If $X$ is uniform on $P(n)$, we have $p(n) = e^{H(X)}$.

Entropy of uniform distribution too hard to compute :( But what about an *almost* uniform distribution?

**Hope:** maybe we can find a distribution $X$ (on partitions of *any* integer) that’s...

- constant(ish) on $P(n)$,
- fairly concentrated on $P(n)$,
- and where we *can* compute its entropy.

Then maybe $p(n) \approx e^{H(X)}$. Very sketchy.
Idea: Want an “almost uniform” distribution $X$ on partitions of any integer where we can compute $H(X)$. Hope that $p(n) \approx e^{H(X)}$.

What’s the “best” distribution? Try Jaynes’ principle of maximum entropy. Here, it says:

Find the maximum entropy distribution $X = (X_1, X_2, \ldots)$ on $\mathbb{N} \times \mathbb{N} \times \ldots$ (where $X_k =$ multiplicity of $k$) subject to

$$E \left[ \sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot X_k \right] = n.$$
**Problem:** Find max entropy \( X = (X_1, X_2, \ldots) \) subject to
\[
\mathbb{E} \left[ \sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot X_k \right] = n.
\]

Start with any distribution \((Y_1, Y_2, \ldots)\).

- **Fact 1:** “Decoupling” the marginals \( Y_k \) increases entropy.
- **Fact 2:** Replacing any \( Y_k \) with a geometric r.v. with mean \( \mu_k = \mathbb{E}[Y_k] \) increases entropy.

\[ \Rightarrow \text{Max entropy } (X_1, X_2, \ldots) \text{ has independent geometric } X_k \text{'s.} \]
\[ \text{Just need the right sequence of means } (\mu_1, \mu_2, \ldots). \]
**New problem:** Find right sequence of means \((\mu_1, \mu_2, \ldots)\) to maximize the entropy of the corresponding distribution \((X_1, X_2, \ldots)\) of independent geometric random variables, subject to \(\sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot \mu_k = n\).

**Fact**

A geometric r.v. with mean \(\mu\) has entropy

\[
G(\mu) := (\mu + 1) \log(\mu + 1) - \mu \log \mu.
\]

Corresponds to a discrete optimization problem:

Maximize \(\sum_{k \geq 1} G(\mu_k)\), subject to \(\sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot \mu_k = n\).
Maximum entropy

Maximize  \[
\sum_{k \geq 1} G(\mu_k),
\]
subject to  \[
\sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot \mu_k = n.
\]

Rescale by writing  \( m(x) := \mu x \sqrt{n} \), “massage” the sums algebraically, and interpret them as Riemann sums. Then as  \( n \rightarrow \infty \), approximately a continuous optimization problem:

Maximize  \[
\sqrt{n} \cdot \int_0^{\infty} G(m(x)) \, dx,
\]
subject to  \[
\int_0^{\infty} x \cdot m(x) \, dx = 1.
\]
Maximum entropy

Maximize \[ \sum_{k \geq 1} G(\mu_k), \]
subject to \[ \sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot \mu_k = n. \]

Rescale by writing \( m(x) := \mu_x \sqrt{n} \), “massage” the sums algebraically, and interpret them as Riemann sums. Then as \( n \to \infty \), approximately a continuous optimization problem:

Maximize \[ \sqrt{n} \cdot \int_0^\infty G(m(x)) \, dx, \]
subject to \[ \int_0^\infty x \cdot m(x) \, dx = 1. \]
Maximum entropy

Maximize \( \int_{0}^{\infty} G(m(x)) \, dx \),

subject to \( \int_{0}^{\infty} x \cdot m(x) \, dx = 1 \).

Pretty easy! Can use Lagrange multipliers (continuous “calculus of variations” version). Solve to find the optimizer, \( m^*(x) = \frac{1}{e^{\frac{\pi}{\sqrt{6}} x} - 1} \), and plug in to get our final answer:

\[
H(X) = \sum_{k \geq 1} G(\mu_k) \approx \sqrt{n} \cdot \int_{0}^{\infty} G(m^*(x)) \, dx = \sqrt{n} \cdot \pi \sqrt{\frac{2}{3}}.
\]

Look familiar? :)
Maximum entropy

**Recap:** Wanted to find max entropy distribution $X$ on partitions with expected sum $n$. Hoped that $p(n) \approx e^{H(X)}$.

We’ve approximated $e^{H(X)} \approx e^{\pi \sqrt{\frac{2}{3}} \sqrt{n}}$. Correct exponential term in Hardy-Ramanujan!

**Method:** Solve continuous optimization problem (approximates $\sum$ with $\int$).

*Can we make this less sketchy?*
Wanted to find max entropy distribution $X$ on partitions with expected sum $n$. Hoped that $p(n) \approx e^{H(X)}$.

**Question:** *How close to the truth is this assumption?*

**Answer:** For the maximizing distribution $X$, we have

$$p(n) = \Pr[X \in P(n)] \cdot e^{H(X)}.$$ 

**“Reason”:** compute directly from distribution.
Maximum entropy

Magic fact
Let $X = (X_1, X_2, \ldots,)$ be given by a probability distribution satisfying some set of constraints in expectation, and where we’ve specified the support of the $X_k$’s (must be discrete). For a wide variety of such constraints, if $X$ is the entropy maximizing distribution, we will have:

$$\left( \text{# vectors satisfying the constraints} \right) = \Pr[X \text{ satisfies constraints}] \cdot e^{H(X)}.$$ 

- “Just do it” – max entropy distribution will always have independent $X_k$’s of a specified type.
- Use constraints + Lagrange multipliers to pin down parameters, then compute directly from distribution.
Recap: Wanted to find max entropy distribution $X$ on partitions with expected sum $n$. Initially hoped that $p(n) \approx e^{H(X)}$.

We’ve approximated $e^{H(X)} \approx e^{\frac{\pi}{\sqrt{\frac{2}{3}} \sqrt{n}}}$.

**Magic fact:** $p(n) = \Pr[X \in P(n)] \cdot e^{H(X)}$.

Remaining questions:

- Error from $\sum \rightarrow \int$? $\frac{1}{4 \sqrt{24n^{1/4}}}$
- What is $\Pr[X \in P(n)]$? Probability that $\sum_{k \geq 1} k \cdot X_k$ hits its mean of $n$. *Prove a (local) central limit theorem.* $\frac{1}{2 \cdot 4 \sqrt{6n^{3/4}}}$

Multiply to get $\frac{1 + o(1)}{4 \sqrt{3n}} e^{\frac{\pi}{\sqrt{\frac{2}{3}} \sqrt{n}}}$. *Hardy-Ramanujan!!*
CONTINUE
SAVE

WARNING
THIS GAME IS REALLY DIFFICULT.
Asymptotic count known for many “flavors” of partitions of $n$, e.g.,

- $\leq k$ parts (Szekeres, 1953 + others)
- $\leq k$ parts, difference $\geq d$ between parts (Romik, 2005)
- parts are $k^{th}$ powers (Wright, 1934 + others)
- $\leq k$ parts, each $\leq \ell$, “$q$-binomial coefficients” (e.g. Melczer, Panova, and Pemantle, 2019, and Jiang and Wang, 2019)

Also, many papers studying the structure of a “typical” partition (e.g. Fristedt, 1997)
Generalizations & related work

Methods including:

- Circle method (many)
- Use results about “typical” partitions + prove a local central limit theorem (e.g. Romik, 2005)
- “Physics stuff” (e.g. Tran, Murthy, and Badhuri, 2003)
- Large deviations (Melczer, Panova, and Pemantle, 2019)

*No free lunch – usually some messy integrals.*

**Related:** “counting via maximum entropy” e.g. for counting lattice points in polytopes (Barvinok and Hartigan, 2010).
Our result

Can use the “maximum entropy” approach for any of these: becomes a constrained optimization problem with more constraints. *But many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip...* (especially: local CLT)

As a “proof of concept”, we’ll count the following partitions:

**Definition**

Given a finite index set $J \subset \mathbb{N}$, and a vector of positive integers $\mathbf{N} = (N_j)_{j \in J}$, we say that a partition $P$ has *profile* $\mathbf{N}$ if

$$\sum_{x \in P} x^j = N_j \quad \text{for all } j \in J.$$
**Definition**

Given a finite index set $J \subset \mathbb{N}$, and a vector of positive integers $N = (N_j)_{j \in J}$, we say that a partition $P$ has profile $N$ if

$$\sum_{x \in P} x^j = N_j \quad \text{for all } j \in J.$$  

Write $p(N)$ for the number of such partitions.

- “Unrestricted” partitions ($J = \{1\}$)
- Partitions with fixed # of parts ($J = \{0, 1\}$)
- Partitions of $n$ into $k^{th}$ powers ($J = \{k\}$ and $n = N_k$)
Notation: For any index set \( J \), and any \( \beta \in \mathbb{R}_+^{\vert J \vert} \), write \( N = (N_j)_{j \in J} = (\lfloor \beta_j n^{(j+1)/2} \rfloor)_{j \in J} \). Then define:

\[
M(\beta) = \max \left\{ \int_0^\infty G(m(x)) \, dx \right\},
\]

subject to \( \int_0^\infty x^j \cdot m(x) \, dx = \beta_j \), for all \( j \in J \).

Main Theorem (M., Michelen, and Perkins, 2020?)

For any index set \( J \), and any \( \beta \in \mathbb{R}_+^{\vert J \vert} \),

\[
p(N) = (1 + o(1)) \frac{e^{M(\beta) \sqrt{n}}}{c_1(\beta) \cdot n^{c_2(\vert J \vert)}}
\]

if \( N \) is “feasible”.

Main Theorem (M., Michelen, and Perkins, 2020?)

For any index set $J$, and any $\beta \in \mathbb{R}_{+}^{|J|}$,

$$p(N) = (1 + o(1)) \frac{e^{M(\beta)\sqrt{n}}}{c_1(\beta) \cdot n^{c_2(J)}}$$

if $N$ is “feasible”.

- $M(\beta)\sqrt{n}$ = entropy of max entropy distribution, after approximating $\sum \rightarrow \int$. $M(\beta) =$ solution to continuous optimization problem (constant)

- $c_1, c_2$ constants.

- Other terms: error from $\sum \rightarrow \int$, and probability that max entropy distribution hits $P(N)$. (Local CLT – rest of talk)
Local CLT (M., Michelen, and Perkins, 2020?)

$X = (X_1, X_2, \ldots)$ a joint distribution of independent geometric r.v.s with appropriate parameters. Write $N_X = (\sum_{k \geq 1} k^j X_k)_{j \in J}$ (the profile of $X$). Then for any possible profile $a \in \mathbb{N}^J$,

$$\Pr(N_X = a) \approx \mathbb{1}_{a \text{ is “feasible”}} \cdot (\text{# integer-valued polys. in some region}) \cdot (PDF \text{ of Gaussian})$$

- Many impossible profiles $a$, e.g. $a_1 = \text{(even)}$ and $a_2 = \text{(odd)}$.
- $\Rightarrow \Pr(N_X = a) = 0$ in many places
- $\Rightarrow$ probability mass “piles up” on remaining points.
- Extra factor on remaining points (“feasible” points).
Local CLT (M., Michelen, and Perkins, 2020?)

\[ X = (X_1, X_2, ...) \] a joint distribution of independent geometric r.v.s with appropriate parameters. \[ N_X = (\sum_{k \geq 1} k^j X_k)_{j \in J} \]. Then

\[ \Pr(N_X = a) \approx \mathbb{1}_a \text{ is “feasible” (number of integer-valued polys. in some region)} \cdot (PDF \text{ of Gaussian}) \]

Proof ideas:

- Want to understand PMF of \( N_X \), and know that \( N_X \) is defined in terms of sums of independent geometric r.v.s.
- Work with the characteristic functions of the \( X_k \)'s.
- Characteristic function = Fourier transform of PMF, so to extract PMF from characteristic function: Fourier inversion.
Local CLT

Local CLT (M., Michelen, and Perkins, 2020?)

\[ \Pr(N_X = a) \approx \mathbb{1}_{a \text{ is “feasible”}} \cdot (\text{# integer-valued polys. in some region}) \cdot (\text{PDF of Gaussian}) \]

Proof ideas:

- Fourier inversion gives \( \Pr(N_X = a) \) as a nasty complex integral in terms of characteristic functions.
- Throw away regions that “obviously” don’t contribute much.
- **Green-Tao (2012)**: this leaves us with a neighborhood around the coefficients of each integer-valued polynomial.
- On each neighborhood, approximate with a Gaussian.
Recap:

- Max entropy approach gives \# of partitions (with restrictions allowed) as \( \Pr[X \in P] \cdot e^{H(X)} \), where \( X = \text{max entropy distribution} \).
- \( e^{H(X)} \) fairly easy to find! *Leading constant in \( H(X) \) given by a continuous optimization problem.*
- Still no free lunch though: for lower-order terms, have to approximate \( \sum \rightarrow \int \) error, and (more difficult) to find \( \Pr[X \in P] \), have to deal with nasty complex integral by proving local CLT.
Thank you!