

A criterion for unimodality

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Submitted: January 23, 1999; Accepted February 2, 1999
Classification 05, 33, 40

Abstract

We show that if $P(x)$ is a polynomial with nondecreasing, nonnegative coefficients, then the coefficient sequence of $P(x + 1)$ is unimodal. Applications are given.

1. INTRODUCTION

A finite sequence of real numbers $\{d_0, d_1, \dots, d_m\}$ is said to be *unimodal* if there exists an index $0 \leq m^* \leq m$, called the *mode* of the sequence, such that d_j increases up to $j = m^*$ and decreases from then on, that is, $d_0 \leq d_1 \leq \dots \leq d_{m^*}$ and $d_{m^*} \geq d_{m^*+1} \geq \dots \geq d_m$. A polynomial is said to be unimodal if its sequence of coefficients is unimodal.

Unimodal polynomials arise often in combinatorics, geometry and algebra. The reader is referred to [2] and [3] for surveys of the diverse techniques employed to prove that specific families of polynomials are unimodal.

A sequence of positive real numbers $\{d_0, d_1, \dots, d_m\}$ is said to be *logarithmically concave* (or *log-concave* for short) if $d_{j+1}d_{j-1} \leq d_j^2$ for $1 \leq j \leq m - 1$. It is easy to see that if a sequence is log-concave then it is unimodal [4]. A sufficient condition for log-concavity of a polynomial is given by the location of its zeros: if all the zeros of a polynomial are real and negative, then it is log-concave and therefore unimodal [4]. A second criterion for the log-concavity of a polynomial was determined by Brenti [2]. A sequence of real numbers is said to have *no internal zeros* if whenever $d_i, d_k \neq 0$ and $i < j < k$ then $d_j \neq 0$. Brenti's criterion states that if $P(x)$ is a log-concave polynomial with nonnegative coefficients and with no internal zeros, then $P(x + 1)$ is log-concave.

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2. THE MAIN RESULT

Theorem 2.1. *If $P(x)$ is a polynomial with positive nondecreasing coefficients, then $P(x + 1)$ is unimodal.*

Proof. Observe first that $P_{m,r}(x) := (1 + x)^{m+1} - (1 + x)^r$ with $0 \leq r \leq m$ is unimodal with mode at $1 + \lfloor \frac{m}{2} \rfloor$. This follows by induction on $m \geq r$ using $P_{m+1,r}(x) = P_{m,r}(x) + x(1 + x)^{m+1}$. For m even, $P_{m+1,r}$ is the sum of two unimodal polynomials with the same mode. For $m = 2t + 1$, the modes are shifted by 1, so it suffices to check

$$a_{t+1} + \binom{m+1}{t} \leq a_{t+2} + \binom{m+1}{t+1}, \tag{2.1}$$

where a_{t+1} is the coefficient of x^t in $P_{m,r}(x)$. The case $t \geq r$ yields equality in (2.1). If $t \leq r - 2$ then (2.1) is equivalent to $r \leq m + 2$. The final case $t = r - 1$ amounts to $0 = \binom{m+1}{r-1} - \binom{m+1}{r+1} \leq 1$,

Now $P(x + 1) = \frac{1}{x}(b_0P_{m,0}(x) + (b_1 - b_0)P_{m,1}(x) + \dots + (b_m - b_{m-1})P_{m,m}(x))$, so $P(x + 1)$ is a sum of unimodal polynomials with the same mode, and hence unimodal.

We now restate Theorem 2.1 and offer an alternative proof.

Theorem 2.2. *Let $b_k > 0$ be a nondecreasing sequence. Then the sequence*

$$c_j := \sum_{k=j}^m b_k \binom{k}{j}, \quad 0 \leq j \leq m \tag{2.2}$$

is unimodal with mode $m^ := \lfloor \frac{m-1}{2} \rfloor$.*

Proof. For $0 \leq j \leq m - 1$ we have

$$(j + 1)(c_{j+1} - c_j) = \sum_{k=j}^m b_k \binom{k}{j} \times (k - 2j - 1). \tag{2.3}$$

Suppose first that $j \geq m^*$, and let m be odd so that $m = 2m^* + 1$; the case m even is treated in a similar fashion. Every term in (2.3) is negative because, if $j > m^*$, then $k - 2j - 1 \leq m - 2j - 1 = 2(m^* - j) < 0$, and for $j = m^*$,

$$(m^* + 1)(c_{m^*+1} - c_{m^*}) = \sum_{k=m^*}^{m-1} b_k \binom{k}{m^*} \times (k - m) < 0. \tag{2.4}$$

Thus $c_{j+1} < c_j$.

Now suppose $0 \leq j < m^*$ and define

$$T_1 := \sum_{k=j}^{2j} b_k \binom{k}{j} (2j + 1 - k) \tag{2.5}$$

and

$$T_2 := \sum_{k=2j+2}^m b_k \binom{k}{j} (k - 2j - 1) \tag{2.6}$$

so that $(j + 1)(c_{j+1} - c_j) = T_2 - T_1$. Then

$$T_1 < b_{2j+2} \sum_{k=j}^{2j} \binom{k}{j} (2j + 1 - k) = b_{2j+2} \binom{2j + 2}{j} < T_2.$$

Thus $c_{j+1} > c_j$.

3. EXAMPLES

Example 1. The case $P(x) = x^n$ in Theorem 2.1 gives the unimodality of the binomial coefficients.

Example 2. For $0 \leq k \leq m - 1$, define

$$b_k(m) := 2^{-2m+k} \binom{2m - 2k}{m - k} \binom{m + k}{m} (a + 1)^k$$

for $0 \leq k \leq m - 1$. Then

$$\frac{b_{k+1}(m)}{b_k(m)} = \frac{(m - k)(m + k + 1)}{(2m - 2k - 1)(k + 1)} > 1$$

so the polynomial

$$P_m(a) := \sum_{k=0}^m b_k(m)(a + 1)^k$$

is unimodal. We encountered P_m in the integral formula [1]

$$\int_0^\infty \frac{dx}{(x^4 + 2ax^2 + 1)^{m+1}} = \frac{\pi P_m(a)}{2^{m+3/2}(a + 1)^{m+1/2}}. \tag{3.1}$$

This does not appear in the standard tables.

Example 3. For $0 \leq k \leq m - 1$, define

$$b_k(m) := \frac{(-m - \beta)_m}{m!} \frac{(-m)_k (m + 1 + \alpha + \beta)_k}{(\beta + 1)_k k! 2^k}.$$

Then, with $\alpha = m + \epsilon_1$ and $\beta = -(m + \epsilon_2)$, we have

$$\frac{b_{k+1}(m)}{b_k(m)} = \frac{m - k}{m - k + \epsilon_2 - 1} \times \frac{k - 1 + m + \epsilon_1 - \epsilon_2}{2(k + 1)} > 1$$

provided $0 < \epsilon_1 \leq \epsilon_2 < 1$. Therefore the polynomial

$$P_m^{(\alpha, \beta)}(a) := \sum_{k=0}^m b_k(m)(a+1)^k$$

is unimodal. This is a special case of the Jacobi family, where the parameters α and β are not standard since they depend on m . These polynomials do not have real zeros, so their unimodality is not immediate. The case of Example 2 corresponds to $\epsilon_1 = \epsilon_2 = \frac{1}{2}$.

Example 4. Let $n, m \in \mathbb{N}$ be fixed. Then the sequences

$$\alpha_j := \sum_{k=j}^m n^k \binom{k}{j}, \quad \beta_j := \sum_{k=j}^m k^n \binom{k}{j}, \quad \text{and} \quad \gamma_j := \sum_{k=j}^m k^k \binom{k}{j}$$

are unimodal for $0 \leq j \leq m$.

Example 5. Let $2 < a_1 < \dots < a_p$ and n_1, \dots, n_p be two sequences of p positive integers. For $0 \leq j \leq m$, define

$$c_j := \sum_{k=j}^m \binom{a_1 m}{k}^{n_1} \binom{a_2 m}{k}^{n_2} \dots \binom{a_p m}{k}^{n_p} \binom{k}{j}. \quad (3.2)$$

Then c_j is unimodal.

Acknowledgement. The authors wish to thank Doron Zeilberger for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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