

# **Policy Gradients with Function Approximation**

## **Actor-Critic Methods**

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# Reading

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- Reinforcement Learning
  - <http://www.incompleteideas.net/book/the-book-2nd.html>
  - Chapter 13.4-13.7
- Sutton, Richard S., et al. "Policy gradient methods for reinforcement learning with function approximation." *Advances in neural information processing systems* 12 (1999).
- David Silver lecture on Policy Gradients
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHZVXao4qXs&t=3s>

# Overview

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- REINFORCE algorithm can work well in some settings but it has to wait for returns at the end of the episode
- Suffers from similar issues as Monte Carlo methods
  - Large variance
  - Slow convergence
- Essentially does not use the Bellman equation
- We will discuss a similar progression of algorithms as in value-based methods
  - Add function approximation
  - Add bootstrapping (actor-critic methods)

# REINFORCE algorithm, cont'd

- Final form for the gradient is

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=k}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) G_k \mid S_k = s \right]$$

- Once we have the gradient, update weights as usual

$$\boldsymbol{\theta}' = \boldsymbol{\theta} + \alpha \nabla v_{\pi_{\boldsymbol{\theta}}}(s)$$

- This is similar to the Monte Carlo learning method where we wait until the end of the episode to observe  $G_t$

## REINFORCE: Monte-Carlo Policy-Gradient Control (episodic) for $\pi_*$

Input: a differentiable policy parameterization  $\pi(a|s, \boldsymbol{\theta})$

Algorithm parameter: step size  $\alpha > 0$

Initialize policy parameter  $\boldsymbol{\theta} \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$  (e.g., to  $\mathbf{0}$ )

Loop forever (for each episode):

    Generate an episode  $S_0, A_0, R_1, \dots, S_{T-1}, A_{T-1}, R_T$ , following  $\pi(\cdot|\cdot, \boldsymbol{\theta})$

    Loop for each step of the episode  $t = 0, 1, \dots, T-1$ :

$$G \leftarrow \sum_{k=t+1}^T \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k \quad (G_t)$$

$$\boldsymbol{\theta} \leftarrow \boldsymbol{\theta} + \alpha \gamma^t G \nabla \ln \pi(A_t|S_t, \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

# Issues with REINFORCE

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- Can you spot any issues with this iteration?

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=k}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) G_k \mid S_k = s \right]$$

- How important is the magnitude of  $G_k$ ?
- Turns out quite a bit – tasks have greatly varying returns
- Especially problematic if \*good\* runs have zero returns
  - Gradient is 0!
- Vanilla REINFORCE has very large variance depending on  $G_k$
- How do we address this issue?
  - Need to somehow normalize the returns

# REINFORCE with Baseline

- Can add an arbitrary baseline  $b(s)$  to compare to the action value for each state

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) (G_1 - b) | S_t = s_0 \right]$$

- Similar to the update in Q-learning
- Expectation remains the same as long as  $b$  is not a function of the action  $a$ 
  - Why?

$$\nabla_{\theta} v_{\pi}(s_0) = \nabla_{\theta} \mathbb{E}[G_1 - b | S_1 = s_0]$$

- Since  $\nabla_{\theta} b = 0$  when  $b$  is not a function of  $a$

# REINFORCE with Baseline: minimize variance

- Can add an arbitrary baseline  $b$

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) (G_1 - b) | S_t = s_0 \right]$$

- Can pick  $b$  to minimize variance

- Recall  $Var[X] = \mathbb{E}[X^2] - (\mathbb{E}[X])^2$

- The variance of the gradient update (in 1D) is

$$\mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \left( \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) (G_1 - b) \right)^2 \right] - \left( \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) (G_1 - b) \right] \right)^2$$

- Note that the 2<sup>nd</sup> term is not affected by the value of  $b$

- Goes away when taking the gradient w.r.t.  $b$

- Dropped the conditioning to simplify notation

## REINFORCE with Baseline: minimize variance, cont'd

- Differentiating w.r.t.  $b$

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{dVar}{db} &= \frac{d}{db} \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \left( (G_1 - b) \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) \right)^2 \right] \\ &= \frac{d}{db} \left[ \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2 G_1^2] - 2b \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2 G_1] + b^2 \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2] \right] \\ &= -2 \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2 G_1] + 2b \mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2]\end{aligned}$$

– where  $g := \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t))$

- Setting it equal to 0 and solving for  $b$ , we get

$$b = \frac{\mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2 G_1]}{\mathbb{E}_{\pi}[g^2]}$$

– Will reduce the algorithm's sensitivity to large variance of  $G_t$

– Issues?

- Estimating expectations may be hard



## REINFORCE with Baseline: running state value estimate

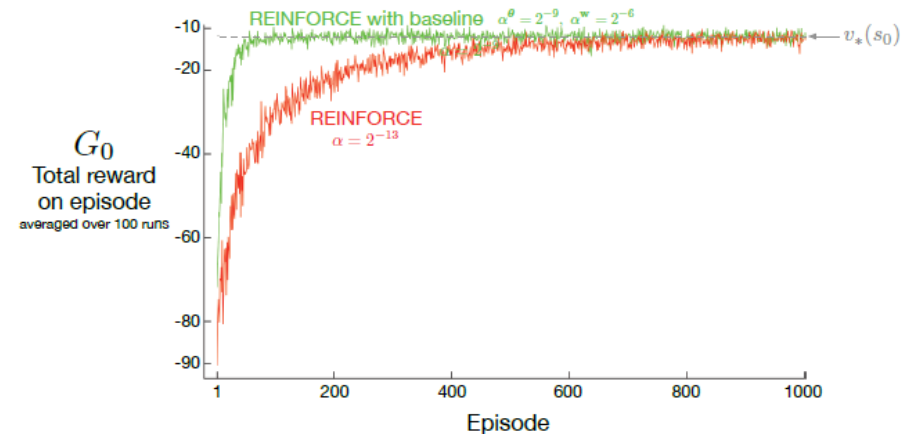
- Can add an arbitrary baseline  $b$

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{t=1}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_t|S_t)) (G_1 - b) | S_t = s_0 \right]$$

- What else can we do?
  - Can pick  $b$  to be a running estimate of the current state value
  - Can have a parameterized  $\hat{v}_{\mathbf{w}}(s)$  estimator
    - Pick  $\mathbf{w}$  to minimize a loss, e.g.,
$$(G_t - \hat{v}_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t))^2$$
    - Can perform gradient descent (with chain rule) after each iteration
$$\mathbf{w}' = \mathbf{w} + \alpha_{\mathbf{w}} 2(G_t - \hat{v}_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t)) \nabla_{\mathbf{w}} \hat{v}_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t)$$

# REINFORCE with Baseline, cont'd

- REINFORCE with state value estimates as baseline
- Lower variance means much faster convergence



## REINFORCE with Baseline (episodic), for estimating $\pi_\theta \approx \pi_*$

Input: a differentiable policy parameterization  $\pi(a|s, \theta)$

Input: a differentiable state-value function parameterization  $\hat{v}(s, w)$

Algorithm parameters: step sizes  $\alpha^\theta > 0$ ,  $\alpha^w > 0$

Initialize policy parameter  $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$  and state-value weights  $w \in \mathbb{R}^d$  (e.g., to  $\mathbf{0}$ )

Loop forever (for each episode):

Generate an episode  $S_0, A_0, R_1, \dots, S_{T-1}, A_{T-1}, R_T$ , following  $\pi(\cdot|\cdot, \theta)$

Loop for each step of the episode  $t = 0, 1, \dots, T-1$ :

$$G \leftarrow \sum_{k=t+1}^T \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k \quad (G_t)$$

$$\delta \leftarrow G - \hat{v}(S_t, w)$$

$$w \leftarrow w + \alpha^w \delta \nabla \hat{v}(S_t, w)$$

$$\theta \leftarrow \theta + \alpha^\theta \gamma^t \delta \nabla \ln \pi(A_t | S_t, \theta)$$

# Policy gradients with function approximation

- REINFORCE with baseline tries to estimate each state's value
  - Greatly reduces variance if done well
- But we still need to wait for returns
- What else can we do?

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a)$$

- We can try to approximate the  $q$  function!
  - Then use the approximation  $\hat{q}$  in the policy gradient
- What is a potential issue with that approach?
  - Unclear if the true policy gradient is still followed
  - Unclear if it converges (and what it converges to)

## Policy gradients with function approximation, cont'd

- What else can we do?

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a)$$

- We can try to approximate the  $q$  function!<sup>1</sup>
- Suppose we use an approximation  $f_{\mathbf{w}}$  of  $q_{\pi}$ 
  - How do we train  $f_{\mathbf{w}}$ ?
  - One option is to use least squares as usual
$$\left( q_{\pi}(s, a) - f_{\mathbf{w}}(s, a) \right)^2$$
  - As usual, we don't know the true  $q$  values
    - Can use  $G_t$  instead – will learn the same  $\mathbf{w}$  in expectation

<sup>1</sup>Sutton, Richard S., et al. "Policy gradient methods for reinforcement learning with function approximation." *Advances in neural information processing systems* 12 (1999).

## Policy gradients with function approximation, cont'd

- Suppose we try to minimize least squares

$$\left(q_{\pi}(s, a) - f_{\mathbf{w}}(s, a)\right)^2$$

- We can use the same algorithm as REINFORCE with baseline
  - except now we use the other form of the policy gradient
  - For each step of an episode:  $t = 0, 1, \dots, T$ 
    - $G_t = \sum_{k=t+1}^T \gamma^{k-t-1} R_k$
    - $\delta_t = G_t - f_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)$
    - $\mathbf{w}' = \mathbf{w} + \alpha_{\mathbf{w}} \delta_t \nabla f_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)$
    - $\boldsymbol{\theta}' = \boldsymbol{\theta} + \alpha_{\boldsymbol{\theta}} \nabla \pi(A_t | S_t) f_{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)$
- Can you spot any issues?
  - Algorithm may be very noisy depending on quality of  $f_{\mathbf{w}}$
  - May not ever converge

# Compatible Approximations

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- Recall the policy gradient

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a)$$

- Suppose we use an approximation  $f_{\mathbf{w}}$  of  $q_{\pi}(s, a)$ 
  - What property would  $f_{\mathbf{w}}$  have ideally?

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) f_{\mathbf{w}}(s, a)$$

- We follow the correct gradient when we update  $\theta$
  - This is known as a compatible approximation

# Compatible Approximation Property

- Suppose we train  $f_w$  until convergence, i.e.,

$$\nabla_w (q_\pi(s, a) - f_w(s, a))^2 = 0$$

- i.e.,

$$(q_\pi(s, a) - f_w(s, a)) \nabla_w f(s, a) = 0$$

- This means that  $f_w$  is the least squares estimator of  $q_\pi$

– Thus,  $f_w$  is an unbiased estimator of  $q_\pi$ , i.e.,

$$\mathbb{E}_{d_\pi} [(q_\pi(S, A) - f_w(S, A)) \nabla_w f(S, A)] = 0$$

- How do we expand that expected value?

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbb{E}_{d_\pi} [(q_\pi(S, A) - f_w(S, A)) \nabla_w f(S, A)] &= \\ &= \sum_{a,s} \mathbb{P}_{d_\pi}[S = s, A = a] (q_\pi(S, A) - f_w(S, A)) \nabla_w f(S, A) \\ &= \sum_s d_\pi(s) \sum_a \pi(a|s) (q_\pi(S, A) - f_w(S, A)) \nabla_w f(S, A) \end{aligned}$$

## Compatible Approximation Property, cont'd

- Suppose we train  $f_w$  until convergence, i.e.,

$$\sum_s d_\pi(s) \sum_a \pi(a|s) (q_\pi(s, a) - f_w(s, a)) \nabla_w f(s, a) = 0$$

- Suppose that  $f_w$  satisfies the following equation

$$\nabla_w f(s, a) = \frac{1}{\pi(a|s)} \nabla_\theta \pi(s, a)$$

- A bit of a hacky assumption but makes the math work
- Sutton/Tsitsiklis conjecture it may actually be the only case that guarantees convergence
- Makes the least-squares gradient

$$\sum_s d_\pi(s) \sum_a (q_\pi(s, a) - f_w(s, a)) \nabla_\theta \pi(s, a) = 0$$



## Compatible Approximation Property, cont'd

- Suppose that  $f_w$  satisfies the following equation

$$\nabla_w f(s, a) = \frac{1}{\pi(a|s)} \nabla_{\theta} \pi(s, a)$$

- Makes the least-squares gradient

$$\sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a (q_{\pi}(s, a) - f_w(s, a)) \nabla_{\theta} \pi(s, a) = 0$$

- What does this look like?
  - Policy gradient, plus a term!
  - Moving the extra term to the right, we get

$$\sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) q_{\pi}(s, a) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) f_w(s, a)$$

- So finally,

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) f_w(s, a)$$

## Compatible Approximation Property, cont'd

- Suppose that  $f_w$  satisfies the following equation

$$\nabla_w f(s, a) = \frac{1}{\pi(a|s)} \nabla_{\theta} \pi(s, a)$$

- Makes the least-squares gradient

$$\sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a (q_{\pi}(s, a) - f_w(s, a)) \nabla_{\theta} \pi(s, a) = 0$$

- So finally,

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s_0) = \sum_s d_{\pi}(s) \sum_a \nabla \pi(a|s) f_w(s, a)$$

- A “compatible” approximation points the gradient in the same direction as the true  $q$  function!

## Compatible Approximation Example

- Suppose policy is the softmax policy as before

$$\pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}) = \frac{e^{\boldsymbol{\theta}^T \mathbf{x}(s,a)}}{\sum_{a'} e^{\boldsymbol{\theta}^T \mathbf{x}(s,a')}}$$

- What is  $\nabla \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta})$ ?

- The derivative of the sigmoid is  $\sigma'(x) = \sigma(x)(1 - \sigma(x))$
- The derivative of the softmax is the same:

$$\nabla \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}) = \mathbf{x}(s, a) \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}) (1 - \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}))$$

- Recall a compatible approximation is

$$\nabla_{\mathbf{w}} f(s, a) = \frac{1}{\pi(a|s)} \nabla_{\boldsymbol{\theta}} \pi(s, a) = \mathbf{x}(s, a) (1 - \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}))$$

- One option for  $f$  is a linear function:

$$f_{\mathbf{w}}(s, a) = \mathbf{w}^T \mathbf{x}(s, a) - \mathbf{w}^T \mathbf{x}(s, a) \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

## Compatible Approximation Example, cont'd

- Recall a compatible approximation is

$$\nabla_{\mathbf{w}} f(s, a) = \frac{1}{\pi(a|s)} \nabla_{\boldsymbol{\theta}} \pi(s, a) = \mathbf{x}(s, a) (1 - \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta}))$$

- One option for  $f$  is a linear function:

$$f_{\mathbf{w}}(s, a) = \mathbf{w}^T \mathbf{x}(s, a) - \mathbf{w}^T \mathbf{x}(s, a) \pi(a|s; \boldsymbol{\theta})$$

- Effectively, we can only prove convergence for linear approximations
  - Linear approximation can be arbitrarily bad if the true  $q$  function is very non-linear
  - May need to trade convergence guarantees for better approximators and hope for the best
    - Will need to look at non-linear approximations (wink, wink)

# Improving REINFORCE with baseline

- Recall the REINFORCE with baseline policy gradient

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{k=t}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_k|S_k)) (G_t - \hat{v}(S_t)) | S_t = s \right]$$

- Similar to MC methods, need to wait for returns
  - Both slow and high-variance
- How can we address it? (What did we do in the MC case?)
  - Use a TD-like approach!
- Instead of using only the current estimate  $\hat{v}(S_t)$ , use a bootstrapped estimate of  $G_t$ :

$$R_t + \gamma \hat{v}(S_{t+1}) - \hat{v}(S_t)$$

# Actor-Critic Methods

- The TD-like policy gradient is now

$$\nabla v_{\pi}(s) = \mathbb{E}_{\pi} \left[ \sum_{k=t}^T \nabla \log(\pi(A_k|S_k)) (R_t + \gamma \hat{v}(S_{t+1}) - \hat{v}(S_t)) | S_t = s \right]$$

- Just like in TD vs. MC, the above usually converges much faster
- This modification is called the actor-critic approach
  - The function approximating  $v$  is called the *critic*
    - Can also have a critic estimate the action-value  $q$  instead of  $v$
  - The policy is called the *actor*

## Actor-critic, cont'd

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- Similar to Q-learning, actor-critic adds a bias
  - but reduces the variance
  - and is consistent (i.e., bias goes to 0 with more data)
- Typically, the critic is trained in parallel with the actor
  - How?

## Training the critic

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- Typically, the critic is trained in parallel with the actor
- Can train the critic to minimize squared error, as usual

$$\left(q(S_t, A_t) - Q^{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)\right)^2$$

- where the critic  $Q^{\mathbf{w}}$  is parameterized by weights  $\mathbf{w}$
- Of course, we don't have the labels, so we bootstrap them
  - We use labels  $y = R_{t+1} + \gamma Q^{\mathbf{w}}(S_{t+1}, A_{t+1})$
- Finally, minimize squared error using standard gradient descent
  - $\mathbf{w}' = \mathbf{w} + \alpha_{\mathbf{w}} 2(R_{t+1} + \gamma Q^{\mathbf{w}}(S_{t+1}, A_{t+1}) - Q^{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)) \nabla_{\mathbf{w}} Q^{\mathbf{w}}(S_t, A_t)$
  - To calculate, need a tuple  $(S_t, A_t, R_{t+1}, S_{t+1}, A_{t+1})$



## Actor-critic, cont'd

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- In summary, suppose the critic  $Q^w$  is parameterized by weights  $w$  and the actor  $\pi_\theta$  is parameterized by  $\theta$ 
  - After observing a tuple  $(S_t, A_t, R_t, S_{t+1}, A_{t+1})$ :
    - $\delta_t = R_t + \gamma Q^w(S_{t+1}, A_{t+1}) - Q^w(S_t, A_t)$
    - $w' = w + \alpha_w \delta_t \nabla_w Q^w(S_t, A_t)$
    - $\theta' = \theta + \alpha_\theta \delta_t \nabla \log(\pi_\theta(A_t|S_t))$
  - We have separate learning rates for the critic and actor,  $\alpha_w$  and  $\alpha_\theta$ , respectively
  - Factor of 2 removed since it is incorporated into  $\alpha_w$
- Note that this is an on-policy approach (why?)
  - Need to wait for action  $A_{t+1}$  from current policy

# On-Policy Actor-Critic Algorithm

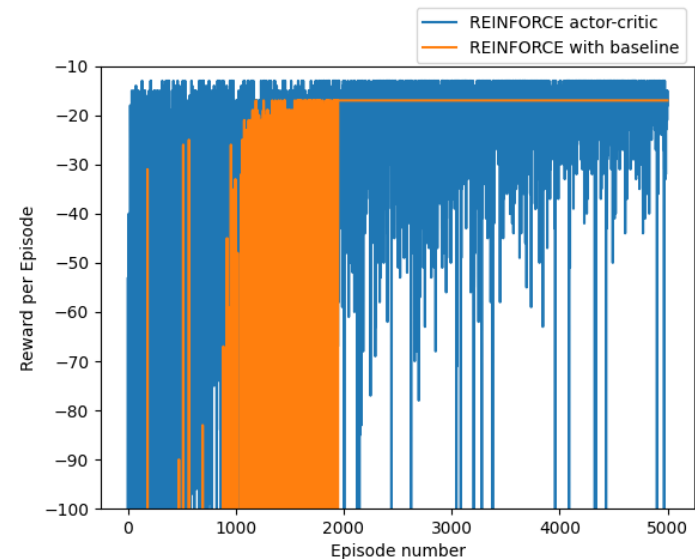
- Ideally, estimate the policy gradient over multiple episodes
  - It's an expectation over trajectories
  - One point is unbiased but has high variance
- As usual, cannot prove convergence for most cases

## One-step Actor-Critic (episodic), for estimating $\pi_{\theta} \approx \pi_*$

```
Input: a differentiable policy parameterization  $\pi(a|s, \theta)$ 
Input: a differentiable state-value function parameterization  $\hat{v}(s, \mathbf{w})$ 
Parameters: step sizes  $\alpha^{\theta} > 0, \alpha^{\mathbf{w}} > 0$ 
Initialize policy parameter  $\theta \in \mathbb{R}^{d'}$  and state-value weights  $\mathbf{w} \in \mathbb{R}^d$  (e.g., to 0)
Loop forever (for each episode):
  Initialize  $S$  (first state of episode)
   $I \leftarrow 1$ 
  Loop while  $S$  is not terminal (for each time step):
     $A \sim \pi(\cdot|S, \theta)$ 
    Take action  $A$ , observe  $S', R$ 
     $\delta \leftarrow R + \gamma \hat{v}(S', \mathbf{w}) - \hat{v}(S, \mathbf{w})$       (if  $S'$  is terminal, then  $\hat{v}(S', \mathbf{w}) \doteq 0$ )
     $\mathbf{w} \leftarrow \mathbf{w} + \alpha^{\mathbf{w}} \delta \nabla \hat{v}(S, \mathbf{w})$ 
     $\theta \leftarrow \theta + \alpha^{\theta} I \delta \nabla \ln \pi(A|S, \theta)$ 
     $I \leftarrow \gamma I$ 
     $S \leftarrow S'$ 
```

# Comparison between REINFORCE algorithms

- Compare REINFORCE with baseline vs REINFORCE actor-critic on cliff environment
  - Use a simple Monte Carlo to estimate each state's value
$$\hat{v}'(s) = \hat{v}(s) + \alpha(G - \hat{v}(s))$$
    - use  $\hat{v}$  both as baseline and as critic
  - Actor is a simple softmax policy
- REINFORCE with baseline converges very slowly
- Actor-critic has lower variance but it has a bias
  - Bias slowly converges to 0
  - Also finds optimal policy
  - Could be better with better critic



# Extending Actor-Critic to Multi-Step Returns

- Can extend the actor-critic method to multi-step returns, similar to TD(n)
  - How?
  - Instead of collecting one-step reward  $R_t$ , collect n-step return  $G_{t:t+n} = R_t + \dots + \gamma^{n-1}R_{t+n-1}$
  - Use return in policy gradient theorem:
    - $\delta_t = G_{t:t+n} + \gamma^n Q^w(S_{t+n}, A_{t+n}) - Q^w(S_t, A_t)$
    - $\mathbf{w}' = \mathbf{w} + \alpha_w \delta_t \nabla_{\mathbf{w}} Q^w(S_t, A_t)$
    - $\boldsymbol{\theta}' = \boldsymbol{\theta} + \alpha_{\theta} \delta_t \nabla \log(\pi_{\theta}(A_t|S_t))$