

# RECSM Summer School: Machine Learning for Social Sciences

Session 2.2:  
Advantages and Disadvantages of Trees

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# **Trees vs. Linear Models**

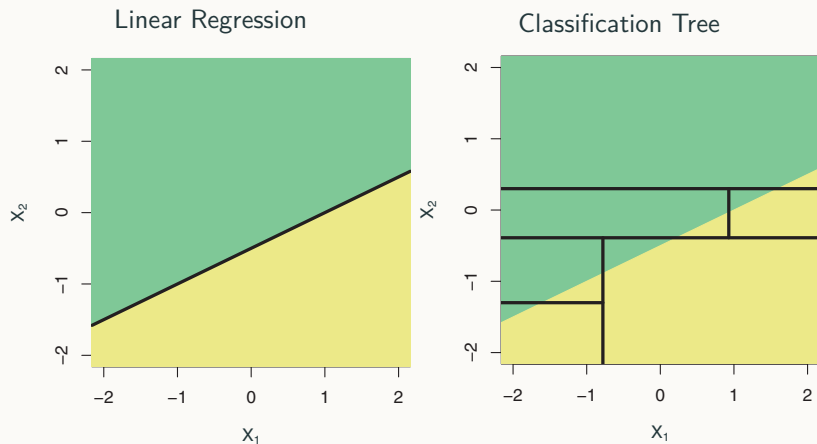
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## Trees vs. Linear Models

- When does a regression tree perform better than linear regression?
- If the relationship between the predictors and the response is **well approximated by a linear model**, then **linear regression** will outperform a method such as regression tree that does not exploit this linear structure.
- If the relationship between the predictors and the response is **highly non-linear and complex**, then a **regression tree** may outperform linear regression.
- The **relative performances** of tree-based and linear models can be **assessed** by estimating the test error, e.g., using CV.

# Trees vs. Linear Models – Example

Two-Dimensional Classification Problem With a Linear Decision Boundary

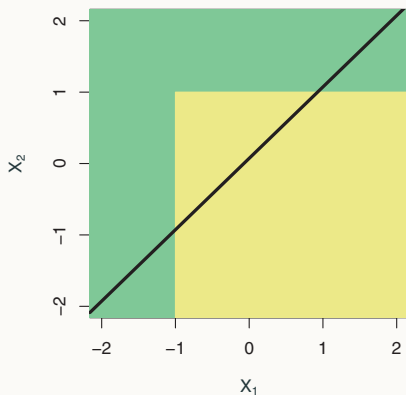


(Source: James et al. 2013, 315)

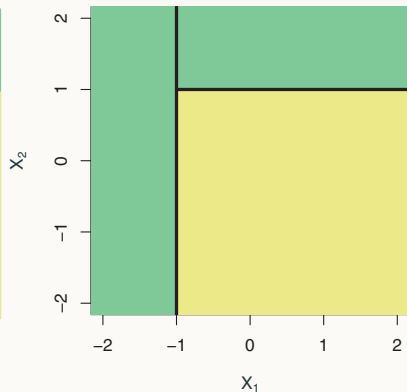
# Trees vs. Linear Models – Example

Two-Dimensional Classification Problem With a Non-Linear Decision Boundary

Linear Regression



Classification Tree



# **Advantages and Disadvantages of Trees**

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# **Advantages and Disadvantages of Trees**

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## **Advantages of Trees**

## Advantages of Trees

- Trees are very **easy to explain**. In fact, they are even easier to explain than linear regression.
- Decision trees might mirror **human decision-making** more closely than do the classical regression and classification approaches.
- Trees can be **displayed graphically** and are easy to interpret even for non-experts (especially if the trees are small).
- Trees can easily handle **qualitative predictors** without the need to create dummy variables.



# **Advantages and Disadvantages of Trees**

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**Disadvantages of Trees**

## Disadvantages of Trees

- In general, trees do not have the same level of **predictive accuracy** as other supervised learning methods (e.g., shrinkage methods).
  - Trees can be very **non-robust**: a small change in the data can cause a large change in the final estimated tree.
- ⇒ By **aggregating** many decision trees (bagging, random forests, boosting), the predictive performance of trees can be substantially improved.
- ⇒ Bagging, random forests, and boosting use trees as building blocks to construct **more powerful** prediction models.