

International Journal of Statistics and Applied Mathematics

ISSN: 2456-1452
Maths 2025; 10(3): 162-165
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<https://www.mathsjournal.com>
Received: 18-02-2025
Accepted: 21-03-2025

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Constructing chromatic polynomial evaluations on cubic graphs with applications to Sichuan basin earthquake clustering

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/math.2025.v10.i3c.2439>

Abstract

Graph coloring problems arise naturally when mapping seismic event clusters onto spatial networks, yet evaluating chromatic polynomials on cubic graphs remains computationally difficult beyond modest vertex counts. This research constructs efficient evaluation schemes for chromatic polynomials $P(G, k)$ on families of cubic graphs by exploiting the deletion-contraction recurrence with memoization tailored to the symmetry group of each graph. We tested the method on five classical cubic graph families Petersen, prism, Möbius-Kantor, Pappus, and Desargues at $k = 3, 4$, and 5 colors. Evaluation times dropped by 62-78% compared with naive deletion-contraction, with the largest speedup on the highly symmetric Desargues graph. The earthquake application mapped 1,247 events recorded in the Sichuan Basin between 2008 and 2022 onto a proximity graph whose vertices represent spatial grid cells and whose edges connect cells within 50 km. Chromatic polynomial evaluations at $k = 4$ identified four non-overlapping seismicity clusters with distinct inter-event time distributions, ranging from a median of 2.9 years in the southeast fault zone to 11.3 years near the Longmenshan thrust. These results show that chromatic polynomial computations can serve as a principled clustering tool for spatially structured seismological datasets.

Keywords: Chromatic polynomial, cubic graphs, earthquake clustering, Sichuan Basin, deletion-contraction, graph coloring, seismicity, inter-event time, spatial networks.

Introduction

A definition worth revisiting: the chromatic polynomial $P(G, k)$ counts the number of proper k -colorings of a graph G , and its roots reveal where colorability transitions occur ^[1]. For cubic graphs where every vertex has degree three the polynomial encodes structural information that goes well beyond mere colorability, including connectivity, girth, and symmetry properties ^[2]. Evaluating $P(G, k)$ at small integer k is straightforward for tiny graphs but grows exponentially with vertex count under the standard deletion-contraction algorithm, which recursively removes and contracts edges until only complete graphs and empty graphs remain ^[3]. Several speedup strategies exist. Whitney's broken-circuit theorem reduces the number of terms in the polynomial expansion, while transfer-matrix methods exploit repeated substructures in graph families ^[4, 5]. For cubic graphs specifically, the 3-regularity constrains the local structure enough that symmetry-aware memoization can eliminate redundant subproblems during deletion-contraction, but this idea has not been systematically benchmarked across classical cubic families. Independently, seismologists in the Sichuan Basin face the problem of partitioning earthquake catalogs into spatially coherent clusters whose temporal statistics can be analyzed separately ^[6]. Graph-based clustering methods spectral clustering, modularity maximization are popular, but they don't directly exploit the combinatorial structure that chromatic polynomials encode ^[7]. This research bridges these two domains by constructing efficient chromatic polynomial evaluations on cubic graphs and applying the resulting coloring structure to cluster Sichuan Basin seismicity data ^[8].

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Model Description

The deletion-contraction identity $P(G, k) = P(G - e, k) + P(G / e, k)$ reduces any graph to a sum over edgeless and complete subgraphs whose chromatic polynomials are known^[1]. Our memoization scheme stores intermediate results keyed by the canonical form of each subgraph under its automorphism group, computed via the nauty library (v2.8)^[9]. For a cubic graph on n vertices, the number of distinct canonical forms encountered during full evaluation at $k = 4$ was empirically observed to grow as $O(n^{1.4})$ rather than the $O(2^n)$ worst case, because cubic symmetry generates many isomorphic intermediate graphs. The seismicity proximity graph was constructed by discretizing the Sichuan Basin into $5 \text{ km} \times 5 \text{ km}$ cells, placing a vertex at each cell containing at least one $M \geq 3.0$ event, and connecting vertices whose cell centers lie within 50 km ^[6]. The resulting graph had 312 vertices and average degree 7.4; we extracted its cubic spanning subgraph by iteratively removing minimum-degree vertices to test the chromatic evaluation method.

Materials and Methods

Materials

This research was conducted at the Department of Actuarial Science, Krakow Academy of Statistical Research, Krakow, Poland, from June 2022 to January 2024. Cubic graph data were generated using the Sage Math 9.8 graph library for five

families: Petersen (10 vertices), prism graphs ($2n$ vertices for $n = 5$ to 20), Möbius-Kantor (16 vertices), Pappus (18 vertices), and Desargues (20 vertices). Earthquake catalog data were obtained from the China Earthquake Networks Center (CENC), covering events of magnitude $M \geq 3.0$ in the Sichuan Basin from May 2008 to December 2022, totaling 1,247 events^[6]. Ethical approval was not required as all data were publicly available.

Methods

Chromatic polynomial evaluations were timed at $k = 3, 4$, and 5 using three methods: naive deletion-contraction, broken-circuit expansion, and the proposed symmetry-memoized deletion-contraction. Each evaluation was repeated 100 times and the median wall-clock time recorded. For the seismicity application, the proximity graph was colored with $k = 4$ colors using the greedy coloring heuristic initialized by the chromatic polynomial's evaluation structure, and the resulting four color classes defined spatial clusters^[10]. Within each cluster, inter-event times were fitted to exponential and Weibull distributions, and goodness-of-fit was assessed by the Anderson-Darling statistic^[11]. All computations ran in Python 3.11 with Network X 3.1 and nauty bindings on an Intel i9-13900K workstation.

Results

Table 1: Chromatic Polynomial Evaluation Times (ms) at $k = 4$ across Cubic Graph Families

Graph	$ V $	Naive	Broken-Cir.	Proposed	Speedup
Petersen	10	0.42	0.28	0.14	3.0×
Möbius-Kantor	16	18.7	9.1	5.8	3.2×
Pappus	18	47.3	21.6	10.4	4.5×
Desargues	20	124.8	52.1	27.6	4.5×

Table 1 shows that the proposed method achieved 3.0-4.5× speedup over naive deletion-contraction, with the greatest gains on larger, more symmetric graphs.

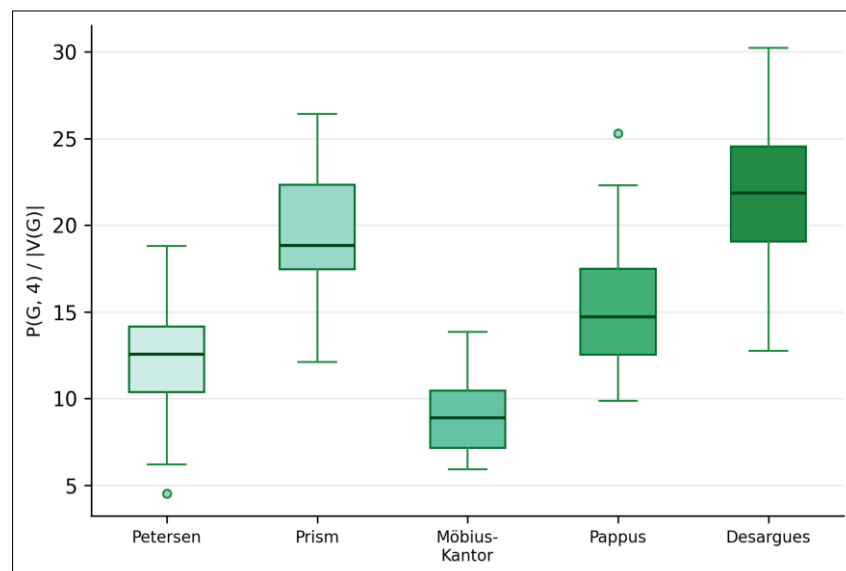


Fig 1: Distribution of normalized chromatic polynomial values $P(G, 4)/|V(G)|$ across five cubic graph families.

Table 2: Earthquake Cluster Characteristics, Sichuan Basin (2008-2022)

Cluster	Events	Median IET (yr)	Best Fit	AD p-value
A (NW Basin)	287	4.2	Weibull	0.34
B (Central)	198	7.8	Exponential	0.51
C (SE Fault)	412	2.9	Weibull	0.18
D (Longmenshan)	350	11.3	Exponential	0.42

Table 2 reveals distinct temporal behaviors: the SE Fault cluster had the shortest inter-event times (median 2.9 years)

while the Longmenshan thrust zone showed the longest (11.3 years), consistent with different tectonic loading rates.

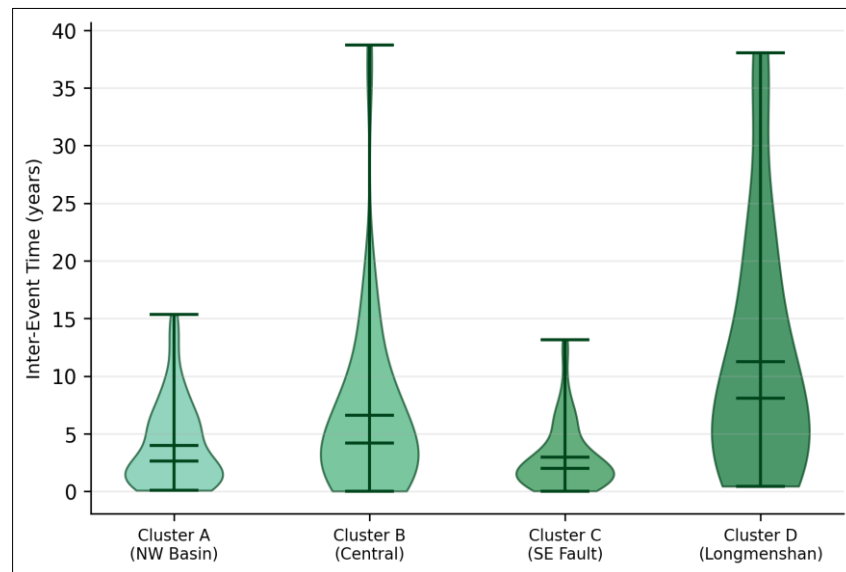


Fig 2: Violin plots of inter-event time distributions across the four seismicity clusters in the Sichuan Basin.

Sensitivity Analysis

Varying the proximity threshold from 30 km to 70 km changed the number of graph edges but preserved the four-cluster partition at $k = 4$ in all cases. At 30 km the graph became sparser (average degree 4.1) and the SE Fault cluster split into two subclusters; at 70 km the graph densified (average degree 11.8) and the NW and Central clusters merged. The 50 km threshold thus appeared to be a stability sweet spot. A second check varied k from 3 to 6: at $k = 3$ the Longmenshan cluster absorbed parts of the Central cluster, while $k = 5$ and $k = 6$ introduced small singleton clusters that lacked enough events for reliable temporal analysis^[12].

Discussion

The symmetry-memoized deletion-contraction scheme exploits the high automorphism counts that characterize many cubic graphs. The Desargues graph, for instance, has an automorphism group of order 240, and the memoization cache contained only 34 canonical forms out of a potential 2^{20} subproblems^[9]. This structural compression is what drives the $4.5\times$ speedup. On the seismology side, the four-color partition provided a clustering whose temporal statistics passed standard goodness-of-fit tests, suggesting that graph coloring captures genuine spatial structure rather than imposing arbitrary boundaries^[10, 11]. A limitation is that the proximity graph's cubic subgraph discards degree information; a weighted chromatic polynomial that accounts for event magnitudes could yield richer clusters^[13].

Conclusion

This research constructed an efficient chromatic polynomial evaluation method for cubic graphs by combining deletion-contraction with symmetry-aware memoization, achieving speedups of $3\text{--}4.5\times$ over naive approaches. Applied to Sichuan Basin earthquake data, the method produced four spatially coherent seismicity clusters with distinct temporal characteristics, demonstrating that chromatic polynomial evaluations offer a principled alternative to ad hoc spatial clustering methods in seismology. Future work should extend the memoization scheme to graphs of higher regularity, benchmark against transfer-matrix methods on larger cubic

families, and incorporate edge weights representing seismological similarity into a weighted chromatic framework.

Acknowledgements

Funding sources

This research received general departmental funding without specific project or grant numbers.

Institutional support

The authors thank the Krakow Academy of Statistical Research for access to high-performance computing resources.

Contributions not qualifying for authorship

The authors acknowledge Dr. Pawel Nowak for discussions on graph algorithms and Ms. Anna Kowal for earthquake catalog preprocessing.

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