THE TOTALLY NONNEGATIVE PART OF $G/P$ IS A BALL

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Abstract. We show that the totally nonnegative part of a partial flag variety (in the sense of Lusztig) is homeomorphic to a closed ball.

1. Introduction

Let $G$ be a simply connected, semisimple algebraic group defined and split over $\mathbb{R}$. Lusztig [Lus94] has defined a “remarkable polyhedral subspace” $P_{\geq 0}^J$, called the totally nonnegative part of a (real) partial flag variety $P^J$ of $G$. In this paper we establish the following result.

Theorem 1. The totally nonnegative part $P_{\geq 0}^J$ is homeomorphic to a closed ball of dimension equal to that of $P^J$.

Lusztig proved that $P_{\geq 0}^J$ is contractible [Lus98b, §4.4]. He also defined a partition of $P_{\geq 0}^J$ [Lus94, §8.15], which was shown to be a cell decomposition by Rietsch [Rie99, §4.2]. Williams [Wil07, §7] conjectured that this cell decomposition forms a regular CW complex. Rietsch and Williams [RW08] showed that $P_{\geq 0}^J$ forms a CW complex, and have proved Williams’s conjecture up to homotopy [RW10]. These results complement work by Hersh [Her14] in the unipotent group case.

Our proof of Theorem 1 employs the vector field $\tau$ on $P^J$ which is the sum of all Chevalley generators of $\mathfrak{g}$, which Lusztig used to show that $P_{\geq 0}^J$ is contractible. The flow defined by $\tau$ is a contractive flow on $P_{\geq 0}^J$ in the sense of our paper [GKL18], so in particular it contracts all of $P_{\geq 0}^J$ to a unique fixed point $p_0 \in P_{\geq 0}^J$. The machinery of [GKL18] (see Lemma 1) generates a homeomorphism from $P_{\geq 0}^J$ to a closed ball $B \subset P_{\geq 0}^J$ centered at $p_0$, by mapping each trajectory in $P_{\geq 0}^J$ to its intersection with $B$. This generalizes [GKL18, Theorem 1.1] from type $A$ Grassmannians to all partial flag varieties. We remark that Theorem 1 is new in all other cases, including for the complete flag variety and multi-step flag varieties in $\mathbb{R}^n$.

2. Preliminaries

In this section, we recall some background from Lusztig [Lus94, Lus98a] and [GKL18].

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2.1. Pinnings. Let $\mathfrak{g}$ denote the Lie algebra of $G$ over $\mathbb{R}$. We fix Chevalley generators $(e_i, f_i)_{i \in I}$ of $\mathfrak{g}$, so that the elements $h_i := [e_i, f_i]$ ($i \in I$) span the Lie algebra of a split real maximal torus $T$ of $G$. For $i \in I$ and $t \in \mathbb{R}$, we define the elements of $G$

$$x_i(t) := \exp(te_i), \quad y_i(t) := \exp(tf_i).$$

We also let $\alpha_i^\vee : \mathbb{R}^* \to T$ be the homomorphism of algebraic groups whose tangent map takes 1 $\in \mathbb{R}$ to $h_i$. The $x_i(t)$'s (respectively, $y_i(t)$'s) generate the unipotent radical $U^+$ of a Borel subgroup $B^+$ (respectively, $U^-$ and $B^-$) of $G$, with $B^+ \cap B^- = T$. The data $(T, B^+, B^-, x_i, y_i; i \in I)$ is called a pining for $G$.

2.2. Total positivity. Let $i_1, \ldots, i_\ell$ be a sequence of elements of $I$ such that the product of simple reflections $s_{i_1} \cdots s_{i_\ell}$ is a reduced decomposition of the longest element of the Weyl group. We define the totally positive parts

$$U^+_{>0} := \{x_{i_1}(t_1) \cdots x_{i_\ell}(t_\ell) : t_1, \ldots, t_\ell > 0\}, \quad U^>_{>0} := \{y_{i_1}(t_1) \cdots y_{i_\ell}(t_\ell) : t_1, \ldots, t_\ell > 0\}.$$ 

Let $G_{>0} := U^+_{>0} T_{>0} U^-_{>0} T_{>0} U^+_{>0}$, where $T_{>0}$ is generated by $\alpha_i^\vee(t)$ for $i \in I$ and $t > 0$.

The complete flag variety $\mathcal{B}$ of $G$ is the space of all Borel subgroups $B$ of $G$. Its totally positive part is

$$\mathcal{B}_{>0} := \{uB^+ u^{-1} : u \in U_{>0}\} = \{uB^- u^{-1} : u \in U_{>0}\},$$

and its totally nonnegative part $\mathcal{B}_{\geq 0}$ is the closure of $\mathcal{B}_{>0}$ in $\mathcal{B}$.

We now fix a subset $J \subset I$ and define $P^J$ to be the subgroup of $G$ generated by $B^+$ and $\{y_j(t) : j \in J, t \in \mathbb{R}\}$. Let $\mathcal{P}^J := \{gP^J g^{-1} : g \in G\}$ be a partial flag variety of $G$. (In the case $J = \emptyset$, we have $\mathcal{P}^J = \mathcal{B}$.) For each $B \in \mathcal{B}$, there is a unique $P \in \mathcal{P}^J$ such that $B \subset P$; denote by $\pi^J : \mathcal{B} \to \mathcal{P}^J$ the natural projection map that sends $B \in \mathcal{B}$ to the $P \in \mathcal{P}^J$ that contains it. We define the totally positive and totally nonnegative parts

$$\mathcal{P}^J_{>0} := \pi^J(\mathcal{B}_{>0}), \quad \mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0} := \pi^J(\mathcal{B}_{\geq 0}).$$

Example 1. Let $G := \text{SL}_3(\mathbb{R})$. We may take a pinning with $I = \{1, 2\}$ and

\[
e_1 = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad f_1 = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad x_1(t) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & t \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}, \quad y_1(t) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \alpha_1^\vee(t) = \begin{bmatrix} t & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & t^{-1} & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix},
\]
\[
e_2 = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad f_2 = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \end{bmatrix}, \quad x_2(t) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}, \quad y_2(t) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix}, \quad \alpha_2^\vee(t) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & t & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & t^{-1} \end{bmatrix}.
\]

Then $B^+, B^-$, and $T$ are the subgroups of upper-triangular, lower-triangular, and diagonal matrices, respectively. Taking $J = \emptyset$, we can identify $\mathcal{P}^J = \mathcal{B}$ with the space of complete flags in $\mathbb{R}^3$. Explicitly, if $g = [g_1 | g_2 | g_3] \in G$, then $gB^+ g^{-1}$ corresponds to the flag $\{0\} \subset \langle g_1 \rangle \subset \langle g_1, g_2 \rangle \subset \mathbb{R}^3$. One can check that the totally nonnegative part $\mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0}$ consists of flags $\{0\} \subset V_1 \subset V_2 \subset \mathbb{R}^3$ where $V_1$ is spanned by a vector $(v_1, v_2, v_3) \in \mathbb{R}^3$ with $v_1, v_2, v_3 \geq 0$, and $V_2$ is orthogonal to a vector $(w_1, -w_2, w_3) \in \mathbb{R}^3$ with $w_1, w_2, w_3 \geq 0$. Hence we may identify $\mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0}$ with the subset of $\mathbb{R}^6$ of points $(v_1, v_2, v_3, w_1, w_2, w_3)$ satisfying the (in)equalities

$$v_1 + v_2 + v_3 = 1, \quad w_1 + w_2 + w_3 = 1, \quad v_1 w_1 - v_2 w_2 + v_3 w_3 = 0, \quad v_1, v_2, v_3, w_1, w_2, w_3 \geq 0.$$

Theorem 1 implies that this region is homeomorphic to a 3-dimensional closed ball. Its cell decomposition (determined by which of the six coordinates are zero) is shown in Figure 1.
2.3. **Canonical basis.** We now assume that $G$ is simply laced. Let $Y$ (respectively, $X$) be the free abelian group of homomorphisms of algebraic groups $R^* \to T$ (respectively, $T \to R^*$), with standard pairing $\langle \cdot, \cdot \rangle : Y \times X \to \mathbb{Z}$. Let $X^+$ be the set of $\lambda \in X$ such that $\langle \alpha_i^\vee, \lambda \rangle \geq 0$ for all $i \in I$, and for such $\lambda$ let $\text{supp}(\lambda) := \{i \in I : \langle \alpha_i^\vee, \lambda \rangle > 0\}$ be its support.

For each $\lambda \in X^+$, there is a unique irreducible $G$-module $\Lambda_\lambda$ with highest weight $\lambda$. Lusztig [Lus94, §3.1] defined a canonical basis $\lambda B$ of $\Lambda_\lambda$; see [Lus90] for more details. For $L$ in the projective space $\mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)$, we write $L > 0$ (respectively, $L \geq 0$) if the line $L$ is spanned by a vector $x \in \Lambda_\lambda$ whose coordinates in the canonical basis $\lambda B$ are all positive (respectively, nonnegative). We denote

$$
\mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)_{>0} := \{L \in \mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda) : L > 0\}, \quad \mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)_{\geq0} := \{L \in \mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda) : L \geq 0\}.
$$

2.4. **Contractive flows.** We recall a topological lemma from [GKL18] that we used to show that various spaces appearing in total positivity (including the totally nonnegative part of a type $A$ Grassmannian) are homeomorphic to closed balls.

**Definition 1** ([GKL18, Definition 2.1]). A map $f : \mathbb{R} \times \mathbb{R}^N \to \mathbb{R}^N$ is called a contractive flow if the following conditions are satisfied:

1. the map $f$ is continuous;
2. for all $p \in \mathbb{R}^N$ and $t_1, t_2 \in \mathbb{R}$, we have $f(0, p) = p$ and $f(t_1 + t_2, p) = f(t_1, f(t_2, p))$; and
3. for all $p \neq 0$ and $t > 0$, we have $\|f(t, p)\| < \|p\|$.

Here $\|p\|$ denotes the Euclidean norm$^1$ of $p \in \mathbb{R}^N$. For a subset $K \subset \mathbb{R}^N$ and $t \in \mathbb{R}$, let $f(t, K)$ denote $\{f(t, p) : p \in K\}$.

**Lemma 1** ([GKL18, Lemma 2.3]). Let $Q \subset \mathbb{R}^N$ be a smooth embedded submanifold of dimension $d \leq N$, and $f : \mathbb{R} \times \mathbb{R}^N \to \mathbb{R}^N$ a contractive flow. Suppose that $Q$ is bounded and satisfies the condition

$$(2.2) \quad f(t, Q) \subset Q \quad \text{for } t > 0.$$  

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$^1$In [GKL18], Lemma 1 was proved more generally for an arbitrary norm $\| \cdot \|$ on $\mathbb{R}^N$. 

![Figure 1](image-url). The totally nonnegative part of the complete flag variety in $\mathbb{R}^3$. A vertex labeled $ab, cd$ denotes the cell $v_a = v_b = w_c = w_d = 0$ (see Example 1).
Then the closure $\overline{Q}$ is homeomorphic to a closed ball of dimension $d$, and $\overline{Q} \setminus Q$ is homeomorphic to a sphere of dimension $d - 1$.

3. Proof of Theorem 1

We first prove Theorem 1 in the case that $G$ is simply laced, in Section 3.1. We will then deduce the result for all $G$ using the folding technique, in Section 3.2. Our arguments employ the vector field $\tau := \sum_{i \in I} (e_i + f_i) \in g$, and

$$a(t) := \exp(t\tau)$$
defined for $t \in \mathbb{R}$.

By [Lus94, Proposition 5.9(c)], we have $a(t) \in G_{>0}$ for $t > 0$.

Remark 1. In our earlier proof [GKL18, §3] that the totally nonnegative part of a type $A$ Grassmannian is homeomorphic to a closed ball, we worked with a closely related vector field, which is a cyclically symmetric (or loop group) analogue of $\tau$. We did so because exploiting cyclic symmetry appears to be necessary to show that the compactification of the space of electrical networks is homeomorphic to a ball, as we proved in [GKL18, §6].

3.1. Simply-laced case. Choose $\lambda \in X^+$ such that $\text{supp}(\lambda) = I \setminus J$. Then by [Lus98a, §1.6], for each $P \in \mathcal{P}^J$, there is a unique line $L_P^\lambda$ in $\Lambda_\lambda$ that is stable under the action of $P$ on $\Lambda_\lambda$. Moreover, the map $P \mapsto L_P^\lambda$ is a smooth embedding of $\mathcal{P}^J$ into $\mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)$, which we denote by $\psi_J : \mathcal{P}^J \to \mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)$. Lusztig [Lus98a, Theorem 3.4] showed that we may select $\lambda$ so that the following hold:

(i) we have $P \in \mathcal{P}^J_{>0}$ if and only if $L_P^\lambda > 0$; and
(ii) we have $P \in \mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0}$ if and only if $L_P^\lambda \geq 0$.

By [Lus94, Lemma 5.2(a)], any $g \in G_{>0}$ has a unique stable line $L_g$ in $\mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)_{\geq 0}$, and this line satisfies $L_g > 0$. Taking $g = a(t)$, we obtain an $a(t)$-stable line $L_{a(t)}$ for each $t > 0$. We see that $L_{a(t)}$ does not depend on $t$, and we denote this common line by $L_0$.

Since $a(t) \in G_{>0}$ for $t > 0$, by [Lus94, Theorem 5.6] we have that $\tau$ is regular and semisimple over $\mathbb{R}$. Let $v_0, v_1, \ldots, v_N \in \Lambda_\lambda$ be an eigenbasis of $\tau$ with eigenvalues $\mu_0, \mu_1, \ldots, \mu_N \in \mathbb{R}$, such that $v_0$ spans $L_0$. We have a smooth open chart

$$\phi : \mathbb{R}^N \hookrightarrow \mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda),$$

which sends $p = (p_1, \ldots, p_N) \in \mathbb{R}^N$ to the line spanned by $v_0 + p_1 v_1 + \cdots + p_N v_N$. By [Lus94, Lemma 5.2(a)] again, we have $\mu_k < \mu_0$ for $1 \leq k \leq N$, and the image of $\phi$ contains $\mathbb{P}(\Lambda_\lambda)_{\geq 0}$.

Consider the sets $Q \subset \overline{Q} \subset \mathbb{R}^N$ defined by

$$Q := \phi^{-1}(\psi_J(\mathcal{P}^J_{>0})) \simeq \mathcal{P}^J_{>0}, \quad \overline{Q} := \phi^{-1}(\psi_J(\mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0})) \simeq \mathcal{P}^J_{\geq 0},$$

so that $\overline{Q}$ is compact and is the closure of $Q$. Note that $\phi$ maps the origin $0$ of $\mathbb{R}^N$ to $L_0$.

Consider a map $f : \mathbb{R} \times \mathbb{R}^N \to \mathbb{R}^N$ defined for $t \in \mathbb{R}$ and $p = (p_1, \ldots, p_N) \in \mathbb{R}^N$ by

$$f(t, p) := (e^{t(\mu_1 - \mu_0)} p_1, \ldots, e^{t(\mu_N - \mu_0)} p_N).$$

We have $\phi(f(t, p)) = a(t) \cdot \phi(p)$. We claim that $f$ is a contractive flow. Indeed, parts (1) and (2) of Definition 1 hold for $f$. By (3.1), we see that $f$ satisfies the property

$$\|f(t, p)\| \leq C^{-t} \|p\|$$

for all $t > 0$ and $p \in \mathbb{R}^N$. 


where $C > 1$ is the minimum of $e^{\mu_0 - \mu_j}$ for $1 \leq j \leq N$. Therefore $f$ satisfies part (3) of Definition 1, as claimed.

Lusztig [Lus98a, Proposition 2.2] showed that $P_{>0}^J$ is an open submanifold of $P^J$. Any $g \in G_{>0}$ sends $\mathbb{P}(A_\lambda)_{>0}$ inside $\mathbb{P}(A_\lambda)_{>0}$ [Lus94, Proposition 3.2], which implies that (2.2) holds. Therefore Theorem 1 in the simply-laced case follows by applying Lemma 1.

**Example 2.** Adopting the setup of Example 1, we have $\tau = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$. The unique fixed point of $a(t)$ in $P^J = B$ is the flag generated by the eigenvectors of $\tau$, ordered by decreasing eigenvalue. Its coordinates (see Example 1) are $v_1 = v_3 = w_1 = w_3 = \frac{1}{2+\sqrt{2}}, v_2 = w_2 = \frac{\sqrt{2}}{2+\sqrt{2}}$.

### 3.2. General case, via folding.

For general $G$, by [Lus94, §1.6] there exists an algebraic group $\hat{G}$ of simply-laced type with pinning $(\hat{T}, \hat{B}^+, \hat{B}^-, \hat{x}_i, \hat{y}_i; i \in I)$ and an automorphism $\sigma : \hat{I} \to I$ that extends to an automorphism of $\hat{G}$ (also denoted $\sigma$), such that $G \cong \hat{G}^\sigma$. (Here $S^\sigma$ denotes the set of fixed points of $\sigma$ in $S$.) We have

$$G_{>0} = (\hat{G}_{>0})^\sigma, \quad G_{\geq 0} = (\hat{G}_{\geq 0})^\sigma, \quad B_{>0} = (\hat{B}_{>0})^\sigma, \quad B_{\geq 0} = (\hat{B}_{\geq 0})^\sigma;$$

see [Lus94, §8.8]. It follows from (2.1) that

$$P_{>0}^J = (\hat{P}_{>0}^j)^\sigma, \quad P_{\geq 0}^J = (\hat{P}_{\geq 0}^j)^\sigma,$$

where we identify $I$ with the set of equivalence classes of $\hat{I}$ modulo the action of $\sigma$, and $\hat{J}$ is defined to be the preimage of $J$ under the projection map $\hat{I} \to I$.

Note that $\sum_{i \in I}(e_i + f_i) \in g$, so $a(t) \in G$ for all $t \in \mathbb{R}$. Thus $a(t)$ acts on $P_{>0}^J = (\hat{P}_{>0}^j)^\sigma$. The smooth embedding $P_{>0}^J \hookrightarrow \mathbb{P}(A_\lambda)_{>0}$ restricts to a smooth embedding $P_{>0}^J \hookrightarrow \mathbb{P}(A_\lambda)_{>0}$. Therefore we may apply Lemma 1 again to deduce that $P_{>0}^J$ is homeomorphic to a closed ball, completing the proof of Theorem 1 in the general case.

### References


