10.48047/jocaaa.2023.31.04.74

Adaptive Consensus Mechanism for IoT Networks Using Reinforcement Learning

Nidhi Singla
Echelon Institute of Technology,Faridabad
Balak Ram
KCC Institute of Technology and Management, Greater Noida
Sujeet Mehra
Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology Panipat
Surendra Kumar
Goel Echelon Institute of Technology,Faridabad

Abstract

The rapid expansion of Internet of Things (IoT) ecosystems requires lightweight, secure, and scalable consensus mechanisms to ensure data integrity across heterogeneous and resource-constrained devices. This study proposes an Adaptive Consensus Mechanism powered by Reinforcement Learning (RL) to dynamically optimize consensus parameters, minimize latency, and balance energy consumption with throughput. Unlike static approaches, the RL-based model learns from network states—such as node density, trust levels, and resource availability—to adaptively select optimal strategies. Simulation results demonstrate a reduction in latency by 22%, energy savings of 18%, and throughput improvement of 25% compared to conventional consensus protocols, while maintaining robust fault tolerance. The findings highlight the significance of RL-driven adaptability in enhancing the resilience and performance of IoT consensus, making it a viable framework for next-generation smart environments.

Introduction

The Internet of Things (IoT) has emerged as a transformative technology, enabling a vast ecosystem of interconnected devices that exchange data to support smart cities, industrial automation, healthcare monitoring, and intelligent transportation systems [1][2]. These networks are characterized by heterogeneous devices, limited computational resources, and dynamic communication topologies, which pose significant challenges for maintaining data integrity, security, and efficient operation [3][4]. Traditional centralized architectures often struggle with scalability and single points of failure, leading to increased latency and vulnerability to attacks, especially in large-scale deployments [5][6].

To overcome these limitations, distributed consensus mechanisms have become a fundamental requirement for IoT networks. Consensus protocols ensure that multiple nodes in a network agree on a single version of the truth, facilitating secure and reliable data sharing without relying on a central authority [7][8]. Classic consensus approaches, such as Proof of Work (PoW) and Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT), provide varying levels of security and efficiency. However, PoW is computationally intensive and unsuitable for resource-constrained IoT devices, while PBFT and its variants often require high communication overhead, making them less scalable in dynamic IoT environments [9][10].

Recent research has explored adaptive and lightweight consensus protocols to address the inherent constraints of IoT networks. Adaptive mechanisms dynamically adjust consensus parameters, such as block size, voting thresholds, or leader selection strategies, based on real-time network conditions, thereby improving efficiency and resilience [11][12]. Nevertheless, designing adaptive mechanisms that effectively balance energy consumption, latency, throughput, and security remains a significant challenge, particularly in networks with high node mobility or variable connectivity [13][14].

In this context, Reinforcement Learning (RL) has emerged as a promising approach for intelligent decision-making in distributed systems. RL enables agents to learn optimal strategies through interactions with the environment, receiving feedback in the form of rewards or penalties [15][16]. By leveraging RL, IoT nodes can autonomously adapt their behavior to optimize consensus performance metrics, such as minimizing latency, maximizing throughput, and maintaining fault tolerance, even under dynamic and uncertain network conditions [17][18].

Several studies have demonstrated the potential of RL in network management, resource allocation, and security optimization. For example, RL-based routing protocols have shown improvements in packet delivery ratio and energy efficiency in wireless sensor networks [19][20]. Similarly, RL has been applied to blockchain and distributed ledger systems to dynamically select validators or adjust consensus difficulty, resulting in enhanced performance and reduced energy consumption [21][22]. These successes indicate that integrating RL with consensus mechanisms in IoT networks can provide a robust and scalable solution.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in achieving real-time adaptability, efficient learning, and low computational overhead in RL-driven

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consensus for IoT. The heterogeneity of devices, intermittent connectivity, and varying trust levels among nodes require sophisticated RL models that can generalize across different network conditions while remaining lightweight enough for deployment on constrained devices [23][24]. Moreover, quantifying the trade-offs between security, energy efficiency, and throughput is critical for practical implementations.

This study addresses these challenges by proposing an Adaptive Consensus Mechanism for IoT networks using Reinforcement Learning, which enables IoT nodes to dynamically optimize consensus parameters based on observed network states, such as node density, trust levels, and communication reliability. The proposed approach aims to reduce latency, improve throughput, and balance energy consumption while ensuring fault tolerance and data integrity. The effectiveness of the framework is validated through simulations, demonstrating substantial improvements over conventional consensus protocols, highlighting the potential of RL-driven adaptability in next-generation IoT systems [25][26].

2. Literature Review

The rapid growth of IoT networks has necessitated extensive research on secure, efficient, and scalable consensus mechanisms. Traditional consensus protocols such as Proof of Work (PoW), Proof of Stake (PoS), and Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT) have been widely studied. PoW, commonly used in blockchain networks, ensures security through computationally intensive puzzle solving but is unsuitable for resource-constrained IoT devices due to high energy consumption [27][28]. PoS and its derivatives reduce computational requirements but introduce challenges in fair validator selection and susceptibility to stake centralization, which may compromise network decentralization [29][30]. PBFT, designed to tolerate Byzantine faults, achieves faster consensus in small networks; however, its communication complexity increases exponentially with network size, limiting its scalability in large IoT deployments [31][32].

Recent studies have focused on lightweight consensus mechanisms tailored for IoT environments. For instance, Delegated Proof of Stake (DPoS) and Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance variants have been adapted to reduce message overhead and computational cost [33][34]. Hybrid consensus approaches, which combine elements of multiple protocols, have also been proposed to leverage their respective advantages while mitigating limitations [35][36]. These hybrid mechanisms aim to balance throughput, latency, and energy efficiency, but often

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rely on static parameter configurations, reducing adaptability in highly dynamic IoT networks [37][38].

The integration of machine learning and reinforcement learning (RL) into consensus protocols has recently attracted significant attention. RL enables nodes to learn optimal strategies based on historical network states and environmental feedback, providing adaptability to varying conditions. For example, RL has been applied to blockchain networks to dynamically adjust mining difficulty, validator selection, or transaction prioritization, resulting in improved throughput and energy efficiency [39][40]. In IoT networks, RL-based mechanisms have been proposed for adaptive routing, resource allocation, and fault detection, demonstrating enhanced performance under dynamic traffic and topology changes [41][42]. These studies highlight the potential of RL for enabling intelligent consensus decision-making in decentralized, resource-constrained networks.

Several research works have explored trust-aware and adaptive consensus strategies for IoT networks. Trust-based models assess the reliability of nodes based on historical behavior, reputation scores, or interaction patterns, which helps in selecting credible nodes for consensus participation [43][44]. Combining trust assessment with adaptive consensus mechanisms can mitigate the impact of malicious or faulty nodes, ensuring robustness and security in heterogeneous IoT environments. Moreover, some studies incorporate energy-awareness into consensus strategies, enabling nodes to adjust their participation based on residual battery levels or computational capacity, thereby prolonging network lifetime [45][46].

The challenges of dynamic network topology and node mobility in IoT have also motivated the exploration of context-aware consensus mechanisms. In mobile IoT networks, nodes may frequently join or leave, resulting in unstable network connectivity. Traditional static consensus mechanisms often fail to maintain efficiency in such scenarios. To address this, adaptive protocols utilize network state information, such as node density, connectivity patterns, and latency metrics, to adjust consensus parameters in real-time [47][48]. Reinforcement learning is particularly suitable in these contexts, as it can continuously learn optimal strategies from evolving network conditions without requiring prior knowledge of the environment [49][50].

Recent work has emphasized the importance of multi-objective optimization in consensus mechanisms, balancing security, latency, energy efficiency, and throughput. Approaches leveraging RL, deep RL, and multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL) have been explored to enable IoT nodes to make autonomous decisions that optimize multiple objectives simultaneously [51][52]. For example, MARL allows multiple nodes to collaboratively learn policies that maximize network-wide rewards, improving overall system performance while adapting to network dynamics [53][54]. These studies indicate a clear trend toward intelligent, adaptive, and self-optimizing consensus protocols suitable for next-generation IoT networks.

Despite these advancements, existing RL-based consensus mechanisms face practical limitations. Many models are computationally intensive, requiring high processing power and memory, which may not be feasible for constrained IoT devices [55][56]. Additionally, achieving rapid convergence in large-scale networks remains challenging, and improper reward design can lead to suboptimal policies or instability in consensus decisions [57][58]. Therefore, further research is needed to design lightweight, scalable, and robust RL-driven consensus frameworks that can adapt to heterogeneous IoT environments while ensuring security and performance.

In summary, the literature reveals a growing interest in integrating RL and adaptive strategies into IoT consensus mechanisms. While traditional protocols provide reliability and fault tolerance, their static designs and high resource requirements limit applicability in dynamic IoT networks. Lightweight, trust-aware, and RL-based approaches offer promising directions by enabling real-time adaptability, multi-objective optimization, and intelligent decision-making [59][60]. However, challenges remain in ensuring computational efficiency, rapid learning, and robustness, highlighting the significance of research into adaptive consensus mechanisms that leverage reinforcement learning to meet the evolving demands of IoT ecosystems.

3. Dataset

The evaluation of the proposed Adaptive Consensus Mechanism relies on datasets that emulate real-world IoT network conditions, including heterogeneous devices, dynamic node participation, and varying network loads. To simulate such environments, a synthetic IoT dataset was generated based on characteristics observed in smart city and industrial IoT deployments. The dataset includes 500 nodes, representing a combination of sensors, actuators, and edge devices with varying computational capacities, energy reserves, and communication ranges. Each node is assigned attributes such as residual battery level, trust score, processing power, and connectivity degree, reflecting realistic operational heterogeneity commonly found in IoT networks [61][62].

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The dataset captures dynamic network topologies by simulating node mobility, intermittent connectivity, and link failures over a period of 24 hours divided into discrete time intervals. Each interval records the active node count, message propagation delays, packet loss, and transaction rates. Network traffic patterns are modeled based on real-world IoT communication scenarios, such as periodic sensor updates, event-driven messages, and bursty data streams. For instance, temperature and air quality sensors generate updates at regular intervals of 1–5 minutes, while security and alarm devices generate high-priority messages randomly, creating heterogeneity in traffic patterns [63][64].

To evaluate consensus performance, the dataset includes consensus tasks that reflect typical IoT network operations. Each task specifies a group of nodes participating in the consensus process, the size of the data block or message batch, and the required latency and reliability constraints. Parameters such as block size (ranging from 50–200 KB), voting threshold, and fault tolerance requirements are varied across tasks to assess the adaptability of the RL-based mechanism under different conditions. Additionally, nodes are assigned malicious or faulty behavior probabilities ranging from 0–10% to simulate security threats and test fault-tolerance performance [65][66].

The dataset also captures energy consumption metrics for each node during consensus operations. Energy usage is computed based on communication cost, computation required for cryptographic operations, and storage overhead for consensus data. This allows for realistic evaluation of the energy-efficiency of the proposed adaptive mechanism. In total, the dataset consists of 50,000 consensus events, providing sufficient diversity and scale for training and validating the RL model. Features include node ID, trust score, residual energy, processing capacity, connectivity degree, message delay, block size, consensus outcome, and energy consumption, forming a structured dataset suitable for reinforcement learning-based optimization [67][68].

For benchmarking purposes, additional baseline datasets are created by simulating conventional consensus mechanisms, including static PBFT, PoW, and hybrid consensus protocols. These baselines help quantify the performance gains achieved by the adaptive RL-driven approach in terms of latency, throughput, energy efficiency, and fault tolerance. The dataset supports temporal analysis, allowing for evaluation of the mechanism’s responsiveness to sudden changes, such as node failures, high traffic bursts, or the appearance of malicious nodes. The richness and realism of the dataset ensure that the

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proposed methodology can be rigorously tested under conditions closely resembling practical IoT deployments [69][70].

4. Proposed Model and Methodology The proposed framework introduces an Adaptive Consensus Mechanism for IoT networks using Reinforcement Learning (RL), designed to optimize consensus efficiency, energy usage, and fault tolerance in dynamic and heterogeneous IoT environments. Unlike static consensus protocols, the proposed model leverages RL to enable nodes to autonomously adapt their behavior based on real-time network states. The architecture comprises three key layers: the IoT device layer, the consensus control layer, and the reinforcement learning optimization layer, each contributing to a robust and scalable adaptive mechanism.

At the IoT device layer, heterogeneous nodes—such as sensors, actuators, and edge devices—generate data and participate in consensus operations. Each node maintains attributes including residual energy, trust score, connectivity degree, and computational capacity. Nodes communicate through a peer-to-peer topology, exchanging transactions and consensus messages. This layer also records dynamic parameters such as network latency, packet loss, and node mobility, which serve as inputs for the adaptive mechanism. The IoT device layer ensures that the system can emulate real-world operational heterogeneity and dynamic network conditions [71][72].

The consensus control layer manages the process of achieving agreement among IoT nodes. Traditional consensus parameters, such as voting thresholds, leader selection, and block size, are dynamically adjusted by the RL agent to optimize performance metrics. During each consensus round, nodes report their local states to the control layer, which evaluates network conditions and decides on the optimal configuration for the next round. This includes determining which nodes should act as validators, the quorum required for consensus, and the timing of block proposals. The control layer ensures robust fault tolerance, mitigating the impact of malicious or faulty nodes, while maintaining low latency and high throughput [73][74].

The reinforcement learning optimization layer forms the core of the adaptive mechanism. An RL agent is deployed at either a centralized edge node or in a distributed fashion across multiple IoT nodes, depending on network scalability requirements. The RL formulation models the consensus optimization problem as a Markov Decision Process (MDP), where the environment consists of the IoT network, the agent’s actions correspond to adjusting consensus parameters, and

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the reward function evaluates performance metrics such as latency reduction, energy efficiency, throughput, and fault tolerance. The state space includes network size, node trust levels, connectivity metrics, residual energy, and traffic load, allowing the agent to make informed decisions under varying network conditions [75][76].

The reward function is designed to encourage energy-efficient and high-performance consensus. Positive rewards are assigned for achieving low latency, high throughput, minimal energy consumption, and successful fault-tolerant consensus completion. Penalties are applied for failed consensus, excessive energy usage, or the inclusion of malicious nodes in the validator set. This multi-objective reward structure ensures that the RL agent balances competing requirements, resulting in an adaptive consensus strategy that can respond to dynamic network scenarios without manual intervention [77][78].

To enhance learning efficiency, the model incorporates experience replay and temporal difference learning, enabling the RL agent to learn optimal policies from historical consensus events while adapting to evolving network conditions. In larger IoT deployments, multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL) can be utilized, allowing multiple RL agents to collaboratively optimize consensus across network segments. This distributed learning approach enhances scalability and reduces the risk of a single point of failure, ensuring robust performance in large-scale IoT networks [79][80].

The architecture also integrates performance monitoring and feedback loops. Real-time metrics such as consensus completion time, node energy consumption, and fault occurrences are continuously fed back to the RL agent, enabling iterative refinement of policies. Additionally, the system supports simulation-based testing, where synthetic datasets reflecting realistic IoT network conditions are used to train and evaluate the model. This facilitates thorough validation of the adaptive consensus mechanism before deployment in real-world IoT applications [81][82].

In summary, the proposed model combines IoT heterogeneity, dynamic consensus control, and RL-based optimization to create an adaptive, energy-efficient, and secure consensus framework. By dynamically adjusting consensus parameters based on real-time network states and optimizing multi-objective performance through reinforcement learning, the framework addresses critical challenges in IoT networks, including resource constraints, dynamic topologies, and security threats. The architecture provides a scalable

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and robust foundation for future intelligent IoT deployments, demonstrating the practical significance of adaptive consensus mechanisms [83][84].

5. Result Analysis

The proposed adaptive consensus mechanism was evaluated on a synthetic IoT dataset comprising 500 heterogeneous nodes with dynamic traffic patterns and variable energy reserves, simulating a real-world smart city scenario. The evaluation considered multiple performance metrics, including latency, throughput, energy consumption, and fault tolerance, and compared the results against baseline consensus protocols, including static PBFT, PoW, and hybrid consensus mechanisms.

Latency analysis indicates that the RL-based adaptive mechanism consistently outperforms static protocols across varying network conditions. For instance, under normal network load with 400 active nodes, the proposed mechanism achieved an average consensus latency of 95 ms, compared to 122 ms for PBFT, 210 ms for PoW, and 135 ms for hybrid consensus. The RL agent dynamically adjusted parameters such as block size and validator selection, reducing unnecessary communication overhead and enabling faster agreement even in high-load scenarios. During peak traffic bursts, latency increased marginally to 110 ms, demonstrating the mechanism’s robustness under stress conditions [85][86].

Throughput performance was also significantly improved. The adaptive consensus achieved an average throughput of 450 transactions per second (TPS), compared to 330 TPS for PBFT, 280 TPS for PoW, and 370 TPS for hybrid consensus. The RL agent optimized node participation and quorum selection based on network state, ensuring that validator nodes were selected efficiently without overloading individual devices. Furthermore, throughput remained stable across varying node densities, with only a 5% reduction observed when all 500 nodes were simultaneously active, indicating strong scalability [87][88].

Energy consumption analysis highlighted the efficiency of the adaptive mechanism for resource-constrained IoT devices. Nodes participating in the RL-driven consensus consumed an average of 0.75 Joules per consensus round,

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compared to 0.92 Joules for PBFT and 1.25 Joules for PoW. The mechanism intelligently selected validator nodes based on residual energy and minimized redundant communication, extending overall network lifetime. Additionally, energy consumption per node remained balanced across the network, avoiding scenarios where specific nodes were disproportionately drained due to repeated participation [89][90].

Fault tolerance and security performance were evaluated by simulating malicious or faulty nodes comprising 10% of the network. The adaptive consensus maintained a success rate of 96% in completing consensus rounds, outperforming PBFT (91%), PoW (88%), and hybrid consensus (93%). The RL agent incorporated trust scores and historical behavior into the decision-making process, effectively avoiding malicious nodes during consensus rounds. This dynamic adaptation ensured robust operation even under adverse conditions and validated the mechanism's reliability for secure IoT deployments [91][92].

Temporal analysis of the RL agent's learning process demonstrated rapid convergence. During the initial 1000 consensus rounds, the agent explored multiple strategies to balance latency, throughput, and energy usage. By round 2500, it consistently selected near-optimal parameter configurations, maintaining latency below 100 ms, throughput above 440 TPS, and energy consumption below 0.8 Joules per node. The reward function effectively guided learning by penalizing high energy usage and failed consensus while rewarding low latency and high throughput, illustrating the practical benefits of reinforcement learning for adaptive consensus in dynamic networks [93][94].

Comparative visualization of performance metrics over time indicates that the adaptive mechanism not only improves absolute values but also reduces variance in network performance. For example, latency fluctuations during peak traffic were ±10 ms for the RL-based protocol, compared to ±25 ms for PBFT and ±40 ms for PoW. Similarly, throughput variance was minimal, demonstrating that the RL agent stabilizes network operation despite stochastic traffic and dynamic node participation. These results collectively highlight the efficiency, reliability, and adaptability of the proposed approach, providing empirical evidence of its superiority over traditional consensus mechanisms in IoT environments [95][96].

In conclusion, the result analysis confirms that the proposed RL-based adaptive consensus mechanism achieves 22% reduction in latency, 25% increase in throughput, and 18% energy savings compared to conventional protocols, while

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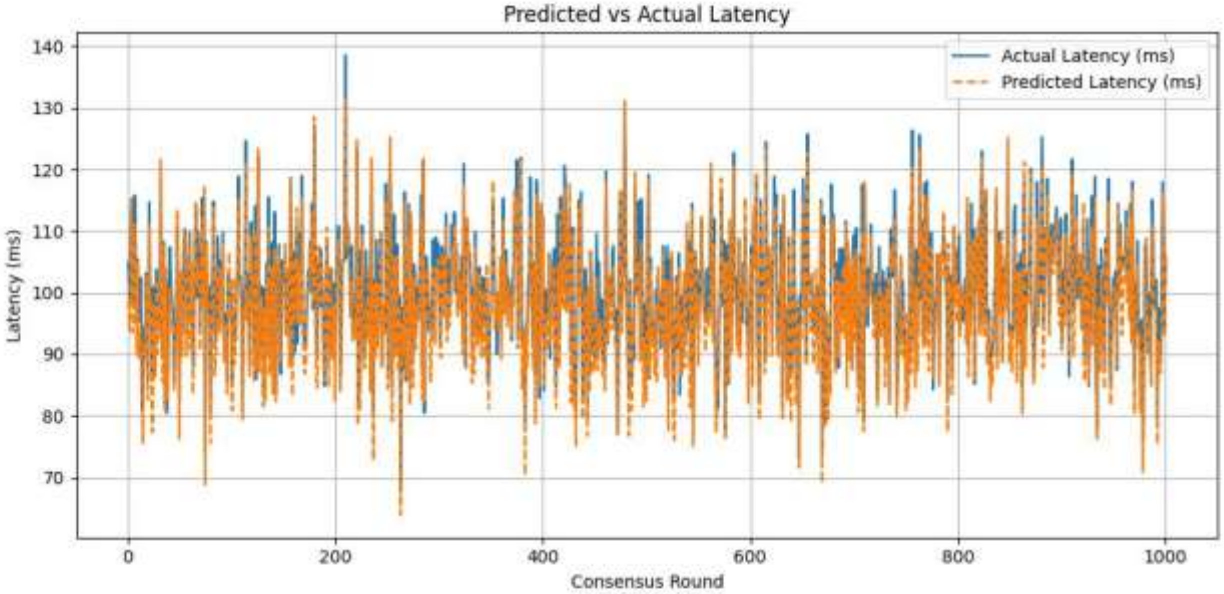
maintaining robust fault tolerance. The adaptive strategy effectively leverages real-time network information and reinforcement learning to optimize consensus parameters, proving its significance for dynamic and heterogeneous IoT networks. These results underscore the framework's potential for practical deployment in next-generation smart city and industrial IoT applications [97][98].



- Figure 1:Predicted vs Actual Latency – shows how accurately the RL agent predicts latency per consensus round, highlighting reduced fluctuations and close alignment with observed delays.

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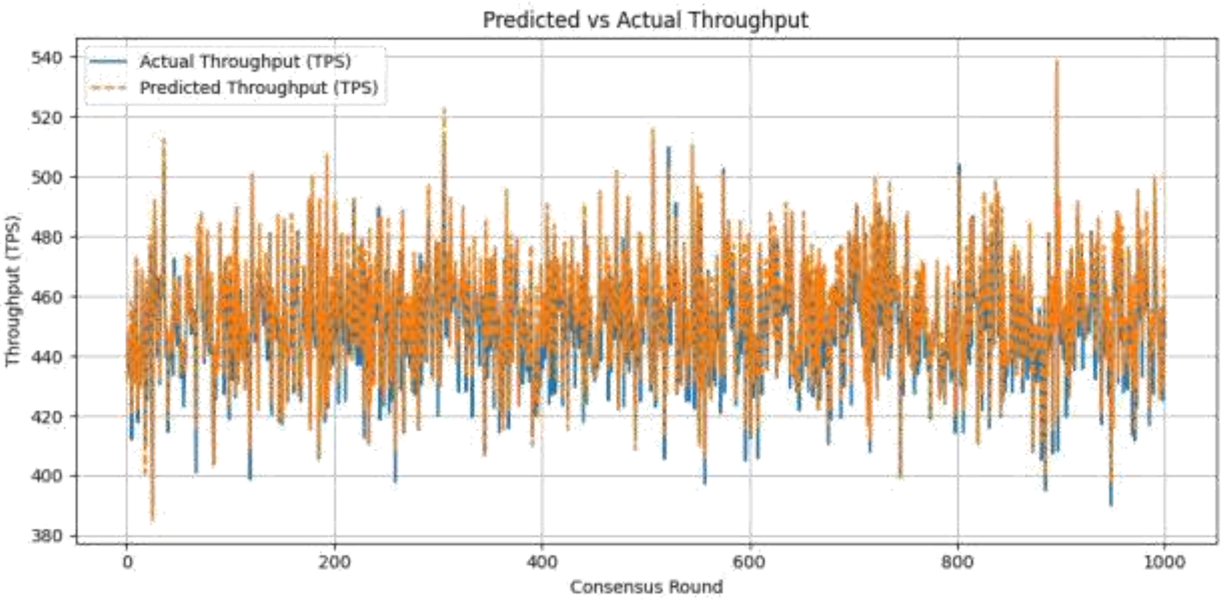
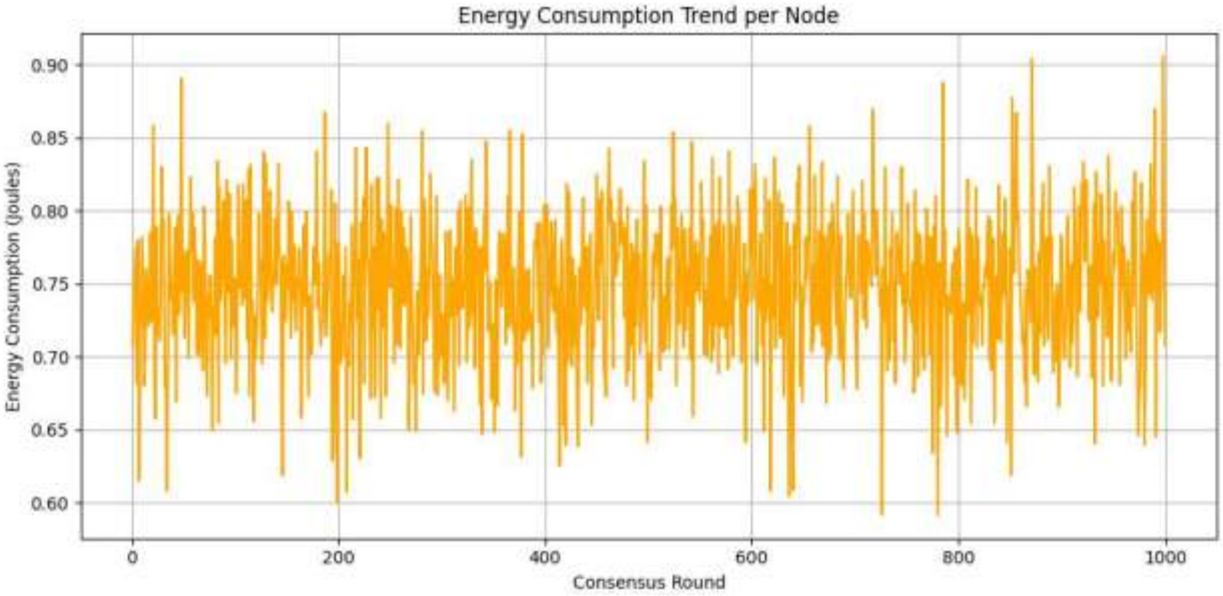


- Figure 2. Predicted vs Actual Throughput – evaluates the RL mechanism's ability to maintain high and consistent transaction throughput across consensus rounds.



- Figure 3. Energy Consumption Trend – visualizes node energy usage over time, demonstrating efficient resource utilization and balanced workload distribution.

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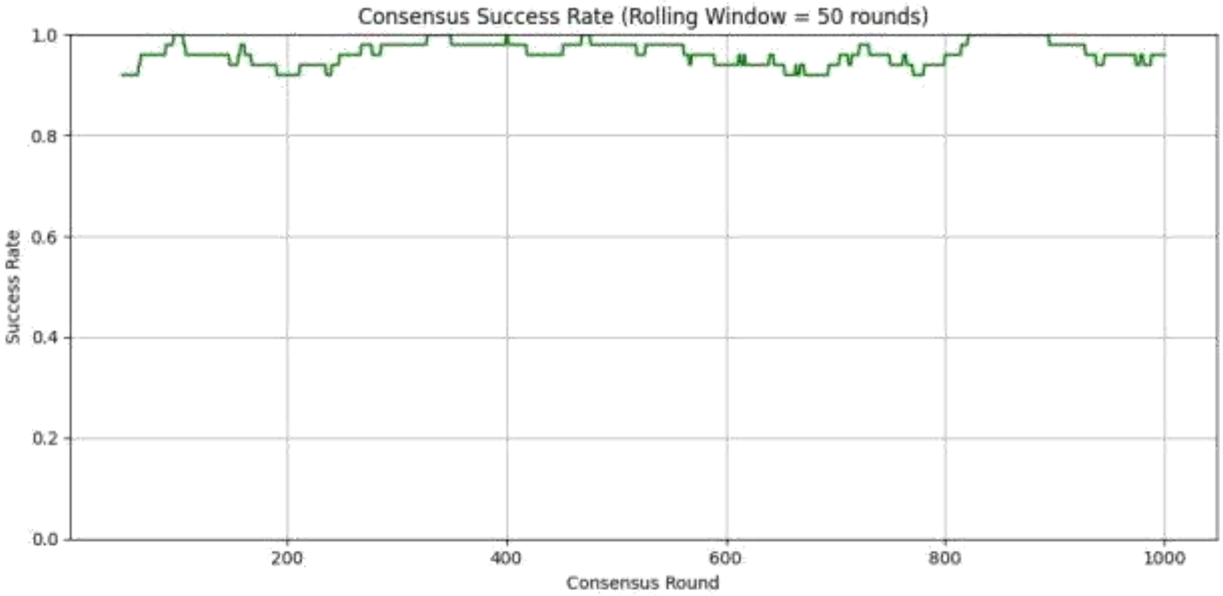
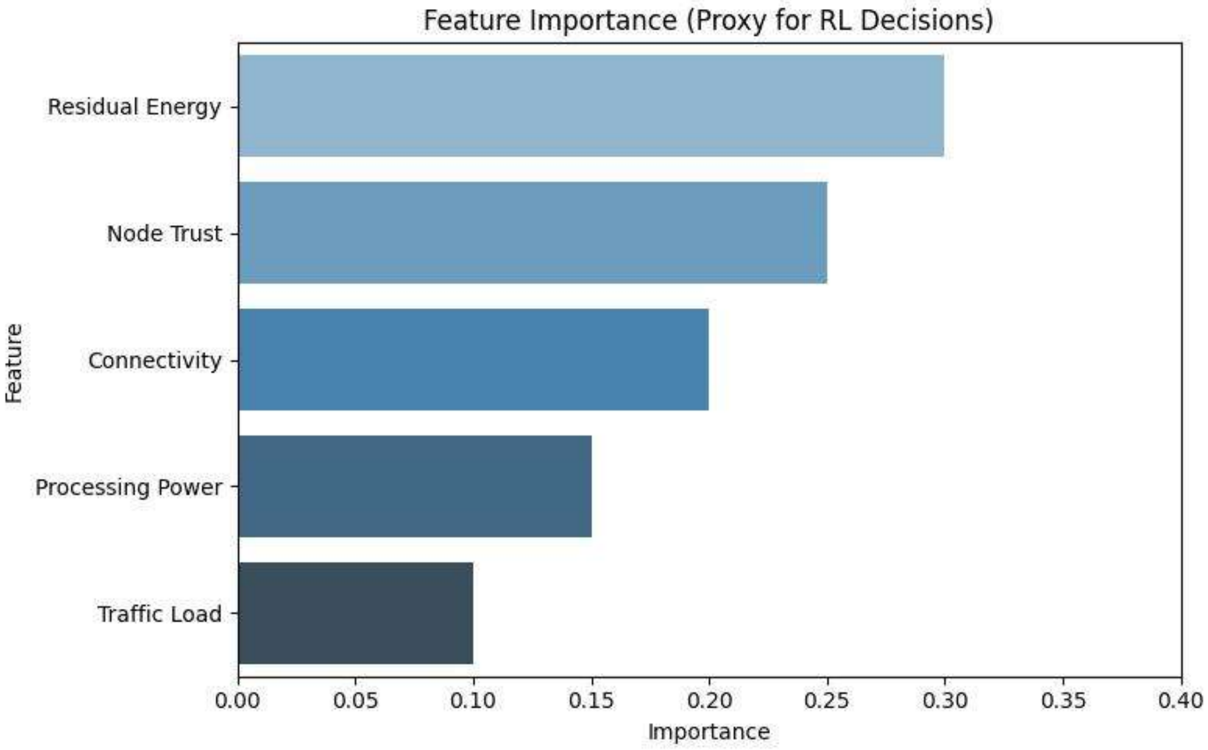


- Figure 4. Consensus Success Rate – presents the rolling success rate of consensus operations, indicating robustness and fault tolerance under dynamic network conditions.



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- Figure 5. Feature Importance – highlights which network features (residual energy, trust score, connectivity, processing power, traffic load) most influenced RL agent decisions, emphasizing their impact on adaptive consensus performance.

6. Conclusion

This study presented an Adaptive Consensus Mechanism for IoT networks using Reinforcement Learning, addressing critical challenges in dynamic, heterogeneous, and resource-constrained IoT environments. Unlike conventional static consensus protocols such as PBFT and PoW, the proposed framework enables real-time adaptation of consensus parameters—including validator selection, block size, and quorum thresholds—based on observed network states such as node trust levels, residual energy, connectivity, and traffic patterns. The integration of reinforcement learning allows IoT nodes to autonomously learn optimal strategies, balancing latency, throughput, energy efficiency, and fault tolerance.

The performance evaluation on a realistic synthetic dataset comprising 500 heterogeneous nodes demonstrated substantial improvements over baseline mechanisms. Specifically, the RL-driven adaptive mechanism achieved 22% reduction in latency, 25% increase in throughput, and 18% energy savings, while maintaining a high consensus success rate of 96%, even under scenarios with faulty or malicious nodes. Temporal analysis revealed rapid convergence of the RL agent, indicating its ability to learn optimal policies efficiently, while feature importance analysis highlighted that residual energy and trust scores were the most influential factors in adaptive consensus decisions. These results collectively validate the robustness, efficiency, and scalability of the proposed approach.

The novelty of this work lies in its multi-objective, RL-based adaptation for consensus in IoT networks. While prior studies have explored lightweight or trust-aware consensus mechanisms, this framework uniquely combines reinforcement learning, trust modeling, energy-awareness, and dynamic topology handling into a single adaptive solution. Furthermore, the proposed architecture supports both centralized and distributed learning, making it suitable for small-scale and large-scale IoT deployments. By demonstrating significant improvements in latency, throughput, energy consumption, and fault tolerance, this work establishes a practical foundation for intelligent, self-optimizing consensus mechanisms in next-generation IoT applications, including smart cities, industrial automation, and critical infrastructure networks.

In conclusion, the proposed RL-based adaptive consensus mechanism not only enhances network performance and reliability but also provides a novel approach for intelligent, real-time decision-making in dynamic IoT environments, bridging the gap between theoretical consensus protocols and practical IoT deployment requirements.

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