

# Snowmass2021 - Letter of Interest

## *High Density QCD in Small Collision Systems*

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**Abstract:** The observation of long-range collective phenomena in small-system collisions, such as  $pp$  and  $p+A$  collisions at RHIC and the LHC, with high-multiplicity final states has attracted wide interest in the community. A leading interpretation is that a fluid-like quark-gluon state is formed in these collisions, as it is large nuclear collision systems. However, for the smallest systems, some conceptual challenges remain and thus alternative sources of collective behavior from initial-state gluon saturation effects, motivated by QCD in the high gluon density limit, have been proposed. The analogy to large systems is also challenged by the fact that, while several signatures of quark gluon plasma formation such as collective flow and strangeness enhancement are evident, there has been no definitive measurement of the expected accompanying energy loss. Significant experimental and theoretical efforts have been devoted to the study of high-density QCD in small system collisions, with the goal of understanding the time-scale for the emergence of collectivity and the mechanism for early-time hydrodynamization in large collision systems.

**The role of initial- vs. final-state collectivity** A reasonable description of the experimental data that exhibit long-range collective phenomena can be achieved for  $p$ +Pb collisions [1–3] within a final-state interaction picture in the framework of relativistic hydrodynamics. A small system scan of deformed nuclei recently carried out at RHIC including  $p$ +Au,  $d$ +Au and  $^3\text{He}$ +Au collisions, has highlighted the key role of the initial spatial geometry and final-state partonic rescatterings in generating the observed azimuthal anisotropy [4, 5]. The flow magnitude in ultra-central A+A collisions appears to be sensitive even to small spatial deformations of the nuclei [6–8].

However, questions remain about the influence of non-linear effects [9] and sub-nucleonic structure [10–16]. Theoretical approaches still struggle to obtain the correct sign of  $c_2\{4\}$  [17] in  $pp$  collisions and obtain large Knudsen numbers, which may suggest that a hydrodynamic description of those systems is not complete [18]. These tensions call for deeper studies of how a far-from-equilibrium fluid at these extreme scales may quickly approach hydrodynamic behavior (see recent reviews [19, 20]), including the influence of the initialization of the full energy momentum tensor  $T^{\mu\nu}$ , insight into hydrodynamic attractors [21–24], effective transport coefficients [22], and Bayesian analyses of collective signatures in small systems. Aspects of the structure of the proton, such as fluctuations in its size [25, 26] and shape [27, 28], may be constrained with further studies. For low multiplicity events, momentum anisotropy arising from gluon saturation in the initial state may also play a role [29], necessitating new efforts and observable [30, 31], to better understand initial and final-state contributions.

A new comprehensive program to scan colliding ion species (e.g., C+C, O+O, Ar+Ar etc.) at RHIC and the LHC by systematically varying the collision system size and geometry at different energies will provide a unique lever arm to disentangle contributions from various mechanisms [9, 32–34]. Studies of polarized beams of small, deformed ions [35] or ultra-central collisions of small deformed ions [15] can further help disentangle hydrodynamic and initial state pictures. Finally, asymmetric collision systems such as Be+Pb(Au), C+Pb(Au) or O+Pb(Au) also provide a unique opportunity to study alpha clustering phenomena in the nuclear structure [36, 37].

**High-density QCD in proton-proton collisions** Events with high-multiplicity final states in proton-proton collisions are also of intrinsic interest to the QCD community. In this framework, they are connected to the multi-parton interaction (MPI) process. Recent efforts in QCD phenomenological modeling [38] have started to introduce re-interactions of the Lund strings in the MPI process, in an attempt to describe the observed collectivity in  $pp$  collisions and make a universal connection to large systems. In this picture, detailed studies of the long-range azimuthal anisotropy in  $pp$  collisions at future high-luminosity RHIC and the LHC programs can provide unique insights to quantum fluctuations of proton substructure at very short time scales [27, 28].

**Heavy flavor collectivity in small systems** Heavy-flavor quarks (charm and bottom) are mainly produced via hard scatterings in the early stages of high energy collisions [39]. Therefore, when compared to the behavior of light-flavor quarks, the study of heavy-flavor quark collectivity provides an additional lever arm to differentiate initial and final-state effects in the collision dynamics. In small systems, heavy flavor hadrons may be more sensitive to possible initial-state gluon saturation effects [40, 41]. Significant elliptic flow ( $v_2$ ) signals for prompt  $D^0$  and prompt  $J/\psi$  mesons in  $p$ +Pb collisions and muons from charm hadron decays in  $pp$  collisions have been observed [42, 43]. The large  $v_2$  for the  $J/\psi$  meson particularly may pose a challenge to the picture of final-state interactions in a QGP-like medium [42, 44], whereas initial state calculations can obtain a large  $v_2$  [40]. The data also indicate that bottom quarks do not exhibit significant collective motion in  $pp$

collisions [43], highlighting the importance of the heavy flavor probes for understanding its origin.

The similarity of the large  $v_2$  for charm in small systems compared to that in large systems, but with a nuclear modification factor  $R_{pPb} \sim 1$  for jets and  $D$  mesons [45, 46] poses a challenge to theoretical models based on relativistic hydrodynamics. While the magnitude of the  $v_2$  may arise from an interplay between the smaller path lengths and larger eccentricities in these systems [47], additional work employing full event-by-event relativistic viscous hydrodynamics that matches the soft sector is needed to understand the data in  $pp$  and  $p$ +Pb collisions. Future high-luminosity runs at the LHC, as well as new detector capabilities at RHIC and the LHC, will improve the precision of heavy flavor measurements and open the access to a variety of heavy flavor states, which will provide stringent constraints to dynamics of heavy flavor quarks in small-system collisions.

**Medium effects on hard probes in small systems** A central complication in the final-state interaction picture is the current lack of a definitive observation of high- $p_T$  parton modification in  $p$ +Pb collisions. Experimental measurements of nuclear modification factors are complicated by the presence of multiplicity selection-induced biases [48] or by unrelated physics effects [49] in the large- $x$  region, making this an infeasible avenue in  $p$ +Pb collisions. (By contrast, peripheral Pb+Pb events suffer from the opposite bias.) Thus the best bounds on the magnitudes of effects in  $p$ +Pb such as energy loss currently come from semi-inclusive measurements, which do not require such selection [50]. However, indirect evidence for the final-state rescattering of high- $p_T$  partons exists via measurements of a non-zero  $v_2$  extending out to  $p_T \approx 50$  GeV [51] and for heavy flavor quarks as described above. Since the partons are propagating in the same physical system being described in a hydrodynamic framework, effects in the hard and soft sectors must be understood together, and the community should strive for a universal description of the produced QCD system.

Data at RHIC and the LHC from small symmetric collisions such as O+O or Ar+Ar can help to resolve this question. Minimum bias collisions are at intermediate multiplicities between central  $p$ +A and peripheral A+A, and likewise no multiplicity-based selections are necessary. Rigorous studies have demonstrated that the theoretical baseline for nuclear PDF effects, and the experimental precision, should be sufficient to observe energy loss signatures in these systems [52, 53]. Additional theoretical progress can be made by fully coupling jets to hydrodynamics as has been done in large systems [54], which would help to link the body of data in the hard and soft sectors.

**Strangeness enhancement** Recent observations of strangeness enhancement in small systems at the LHC [55] confirm that this phenomenon, historically understood to be a signature of quark-gluon plasma formation, is universal across hadronic collision systems at collider energies. Several MC-based [56] and core-corona [57] approaches are able to reproduce the data leading to the idea that small systems may couple a hydrodynamics core to partons in a vacuum or hadronic corona. Further studies that explore flow harmonics,  $\langle p_T \rangle$ , two freeze-out temperatures [58], or gluon splittings into  $s\bar{s}$  pairs [59] are warranted. Theory would be significantly aided with measurements of net-Kaon and/or net- $\Lambda$  fluctuations across system size.

**Other opportunities** Additional small systems running at RHIC and the LHC offers several opportunities which are described in other Letters of Interest. These include the new opportunities for extracting parton density modifications in nuclei (nPDFs), nuclear structure, electromagnetic signatures, ultra-peripheral collision (UPC) physics programs, and Beyond the Standard Model (BSM) searches which take advantages of the experimental conditions of heavy ion collisions. Thus the program described here has a valuable synergistic overlap with other physics programs.

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