Essential elements for nuclear binding

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Abstract

How does nuclear binding emerge from first principles? Our current best understanding of nuclear forces is based on a systematic low-energy expansion called chiral effective field theory. However, recent ab initio calculations of nuclear structure have found that not all chiral effective field theory interactions give accurate predictions with increasing nuclear density. In this letter we address the reason for this problem and the first steps toward a solution. Using nuclear lattice simulations, we deduce the minimal nuclear interaction that can reproduce the ground state properties of light nuclei, medium-mass nuclei, and neutron matter simultaneously with no more than a few percent error in the energies and charge radii. We find that only four parameters are needed. With these four parameters one can accurately describe neutron matter up to saturation density and the ground state properties of nuclei up to calcium. Given the absence of sign oscillations in these lattice Monte Carlo simulations and the mild scaling of computational effort with nucleon number, this work provides a pathway to high-quality simulations in the future with as many as one or two hundred nucleons.

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configurations. For example, we have seen in lattice calculations of binding energies for closed shell systems that the contribution from the repulsive P-wave channels often cancels most of the contribution from the attractive P-wave channels. We note also the intriguing analysis in Ref. [23] which demonstrates the connection between quantum chromodynamics with a large number of colors to Wigner’s SU(4) symmetry for the S-wave interactions and Serber symmetry for the P-wave interactions. Similarly most isospin-dependent forces tend to cancel in symmetric nuclear matter due to the equal number of protons and neutrons, the one notable exception being the Coulomb interaction. The idea of SU(4) universality at large S-wave scattering length has a rich history in nuclear physics. It is well known that the Tjon line relating $^3$H and $^4$He binding energies is a manifestation of universality in nuclear systems [24,25]. It has also been shown that $^3$H and $^4$He are characterized by universal physics associated with the Efimov effect [26,27]. The coherent enhancement of SU(4)-invariant forces in the nuclear many-body environment suggests a possible resurgence of SU(4) symmetry in heavier nuclei as well. This idea inspired the exploratory work in Ref. [28] on the structure of nuclei up through oxygen using an SU(4)-invariant interaction. This built upon previous work in Ref. [21] which showed that local SU(4)-invariant interactions have a particularly strong effect on nuclear binding. The special role of local forces has also been studied by looking at the effective interactions between two bound dimers in a one-dimensional model [29].

In this work we attempt to tie all of the loose threads together. We start by acknowledging that not every EFT interaction will give well controlled and reliable results for heavier systems. Additional ingredients are needed to make sure that the convergence of higher-order terms is under control. In order to see what the essential elements might be, we take a constructive reductionist approach and deduce the minimal nuclear interaction that can reproduce the ground state properties of light nuclei, medium-mass nuclei, and neutron matter simultaneously with no more than a few percent error in the energies and charge radii.

We start with a simple SU(4)-invariant leading order effective field theory without explicit pions (pion-less EFT) on a periodic $L^3$ cube with lattice coordinates $n = (n_x, n_y, n_z)$. The Hamiltonian is

$$H_{SU(4)} = H_{\text{free}} + \frac{1}{2L^3} C_2 \sum_n \hat{\rho}(n)^2 + \frac{1}{3L^3} C_3 \sum_n \hat{\rho}(n)^3,$$

(1)

where $H_{\text{free}}$ is the free nucleon Hamiltonian with nucleon mass $m = 938.9$ MeV. The density operator $\hat{\rho}(n)$ is defined in the same manner as in Ref. [28],

$$\hat{\rho}(n) = \sum_i a_i^\dagger(n) a_i(n) + s_{NL} \sum_{|n' - n| = 1} \sum_i a_i^\dagger(n') a_i(n'),$$

(2)

where $i$ is the joint spin-isospin index and the smeared annihilation and creation operators are defined as

$$a_i(n) = a_i(n) + s_{NL} \sum_{|n' - n| = 1} a_i^\dagger(n'),$$

(3)

The summation over the spin and isospin implies that the interaction is SU(4) invariant. The parameter $s_L$ controls the range of the local part of the interaction, while $s_{NL}$ controls the range of the nonlocal part of the interaction. The parameters $C_2$ and $C_3$ give the strength of the two-body and three-body interactions, respectively.

In this letter we use a lattice spacing $a = 1.32$ fm, which corresponds to a momentum cutoff $\Lambda = \pi/a \approx 465$ MeV. The dynamics with momentum $Q$ much smaller than $\Lambda$ can be well described and residual lattice artifacts are suppressed by powers of $Q^2$. In Ref. [30] we showed that the nucleon-nucleon scattering phase shift can be precisely extracted on the lattice using the spherical wall method. In this work we fix the two-body interaction by fitting the scattering length $a_0$ and effective range $r_0$. In each instance we calculate the $S$-wave phase shifts below relative momentum $P_{rel} \leq 50$ MeV using the spherical wall method and calculate fit errors by comparing results with the effective range expansion.

For systems with more than three nucleons, we use auxiliary-field Monte Carlo lattice simulations for a cubic periodic box with length $L$ [32,33]. For nuclei with $A < 30$ nucleons, we take $L \geq 8$, with larger values of $L$ for cases where more accuracy is desired. For nuclei with $A \geq 30$ we take $L = 9$. The temporal lattice spacing is 0.001 $\text{MeV}^{-1}$ and the projection time is set to 0.3 $\text{MeV}^{-1}$. We find that these settings are enough to provide accurate results for systems with $A \leq 48$. We also use the recently-developed pin-hole algorithm [28] in order to calculate density distributions and charge radii.

We use few-body data with $A \leq 3$ to fix the interaction coefficients $C_2$ and $C_3$, while the range of the interactions are controlled by the parameters $s_{NL}$ and $s_L$. The particular combination of $s_{NL}$ and $s_L$ we choose is set through a procedure we now describe. In the few-body sector, the two smearing parameters $s_{NL}$ and $s_L$ produce very similar effects and are difficult to distinguish from few-body data alone [21]. Therefore the chosen values for $s_{NL}$ and $s_L$ are fixed later after calculating heavier nuclei. The two-body interaction strength $C_2$ and interaction range are determined by fitting the scattering length $a_0$ and effective range $r_0$ averaged over the two $S$-wave channels, $^1S_0$ and $^3S_1$. We adjust $a_0$ to minimize the corrections to the $^3$H and $^4$He binding energies that arise from the differences between the two $S$-wave channels. This process gives an optimal value of $a_0 = 9.1$ fm, and we use this value for $a_0$ in what follows. We note that our SU(4)-invariant deuteron is degenerate with the di-neutron ground state and has less than half of the physical deuteron binding energy. However this issue is easily fixed when SU(4)-breaking interactions are included. For the SU(4)-averaged effective range we use $r_0 = ((t_0(^1S_0) + t_0(^3S_1))/2 \approx 2.2$ fm.

We determine the three-body coupling strength $C_3$ by fitting to the $^3$H binding energy. At the physical point $B(^3\text{H}) = 8.48$ MeV, the $^4\text{He}$ binding energy with the Coulomb interaction included is 28.9 MeV. This is close to the experimental value $B(^4\text{He}) = 28.3$ MeV. We carry out this fitting process for several different pairs of values for $s_{NL}$ and $s_L$, and for each pair we calculate a handful of nuclear ground states using auxiliary-field lattice Monte Carlo simulations. As described in the Supporting Online Materials section, we find that the pair $s_{NL} = 0.5$ and $s_L = 0.061$ gives the best overall description. The full set of optimized parameters are $C_T = -3.41 \times 10^{-7}$ $\text{MeV}^{-2}$, $C_S = -1.4 \times 10^{-14}$ $\text{MeV}^{-5}$, $s_{NL} = 0.5$, and $s_L = 0.061$.

In Table 1 we show the binding energies and charge radii for selected nuclei. For comparison we also list the experimental values and the calculated Coulomb energy. While the $^3$H energy is exact due to the fitting procedure, all the other values are predictions. The largest relative error in binding energy is 4% and occurs for $^{16}\text{O}$. The largest relative error in the charge radius is 8% and occurs for $^3\text{H}$. For the calculations of nuclear charge radii, we have taken into account the charge radius of the proton.

We now calculate the binding energies for 86 bound even-even nuclei (even number of protons, even number of neutrons) with up to $A = 49$ nucleons. The results are shown and compared with empirical data in Fig. 1. Because the interaction has an exact SU(4) symmetry, we are free of the sign problem and can calculate the binding energies with high precision. In Fig. 1 all of the Monte Carlo error bars are smaller than the size of the symbols. The re-
remaining errors due to imaginary time and volume extrapolations are also small, less than 1% relative error, and thus are also not explicitly shown. In Fig. 1 we see that the general trends for the binding energies along each isotopic chain are well reproduced. In particular, the isotopic curves on the proton-rich side are close to the experimental results. The discrepancy is somewhat larger on the neutron-rich side and is a sign of missing effects such as spin-dependent interactions.

The charge density profile is another important probe of nuclear structure. In Fig. 2 we show the charge densities of $^{16}$O and $^{40}$Ca calculated with the pinhole algorithm. We have again taken into account the charge distribution of the proton. To compare with data from the electron scattering experiments we also show results with the Coulomb interaction included via first order perturbation theory. The Coulomb force suppresses the central densities, drawing the results closer to the empirical data. Our results are quite accurate for such a simple nuclear interaction.

We also examine the predictions for pure neutron matter (NM). In Fig. 3 we show the calculated NM energy as a function of the neutron density and the comparison with other calculations using next-to-next-to-next-to-leading-order (N$^3$LO) chiral interactions. In the lattice results we vary the number of neutrons from 14 to 66. The data for three different box sizes $L=5$ (upright triangles), $L=6$ (squares), $L=7$ (rightward-pointing triangles) are marked as filled red polygons. We see that our results are in general agreement with the other calculations at densities above 0.05 fm$^{-3}$, though calculations at higher orders are needed and are planned in future work to estimate uncertainties. At lower densities the discrepancy is larger as a result of our SU(4)-invariant interaction having the incorrect neutron-neutron scattering length. The open red polygons, again $L=5$ (upright triangles), $L=6$ (squares), $L=7$ (rightward-pointing triangles), show an improved calculation with a short-range interaction to reproduce the physical neutron-neutron scattering length as well as a correction to improve invariance under Galilean boosts. The restoration of Galilean invariance on the lattice is described in Ref. [40]. Overall, the results are quite good in view of the simplicity of the four-parameter interaction.

In this letter we have shown that the ground state properties of light nuclei, medium-mass nuclei, and neutron matter can be described using a minimal nuclear interaction with only four interaction parameters. While the first three parameters are already standard in $\chi$EFT, the fourth and last parameter is a new feature that controls the strength of the local part of the nuclear interactions. These insights can help design $\chi$EFT interactions with better convergence at higher densities. We encourage others to test simplified interactions in continuum nuclear structure calculations, interactions with SU(4) symmetry and a combination of local and nonlocal smearing. The details of our interaction are given in the Supplemental Material. In the continuum calculations, however, one can construct interactions with exact Galilean invariance, something that needs to be corrected order by order on the lattice [40].
We are now using SU(4)-symmetric short-range interactions with local and nonlocal smearing and also one-pion exchange as the starting point for improved calculations of light and medium-mass nuclei with chiral forces up to NLO. While our ongoing N3LO work is far from finished, we do know that the corrections at NLO are typically at the 10% level in the binding energies. We should clarify that what we called LO in lattice chiral effective field theory is actually an improved LO calculation where the S-wave effective range correction is included. If the S-wave effective range correction were not included at LO, then the NLO correction would be at the 30% level. This 10% correction at NLO might still seem too large since the agreement between the LO results in this work and the experimental binding energies are better than 10%. However, this better-than-expected agreement can be explained by the additional fine-tuning we gain by adjusting the balance between local and nonlocal interactions to achieve accurate liquid drop properties.

The main takeaway message of the work presented here is that while some fine tuning of the chiral forces seems necessary to improve convergence at higher densities, the number of independent fine tunings does not appear to be large. While we have not solved the convergence problem, we characterized the scope of problem. The key remaining question is how to accomplish these fine tunings without fitting to the many-body data that we wish to predict. We plan to address this question in a forthcoming publication.

Aside from the Coulomb interaction, all of the other interactions in our minimal model respect Wigner’s SU(4) symmetry. This is an example of emergent symmetry. The SU(4)-invariant interaction resurges at higher densities not because the underlying fundamental interaction is exactly invariant, but because the SU(4)-invariant interaction is coherently enhanced in the many-body environment. This is not to minimize the important role of spin-dependent effects such as spin-orbit couplings and tensor forces. However, it does seem to suggest that SU(4) invariance plays a key role in the bulk properties of nuclear matter.

The computational effort needed for the auxiliary-field lattice Monte Carlo simulations scales with the number of nucleons, A, as somewhere between A¹ to A² for medium mass nuclei. The actual exponent depends on the architecture of the computing platform. The SU(4)-invariant interaction provides an enormous computational advantage by removing sign oscillations from the lattice Monte Carlo simulations for any even-even nucleus. Coulomb interactions and all other corrections can be implemented using perturbation theory or the recently-developed eigenvector continuation method if the corrections are too large for perturbation theory [41]. Given the mild scaling with nucleon number and suppression of sign oscillations, the methods presented here provide a new route to realistic lattice simulations of heavy nuclei in the future with as many as one or two hundred nucleons. By realistic calculations we mean calculations where one can demonstrate order-by-order convergence in the chiral expansion going from LO to NLO, NLO to N²LO, and N²LO to N³LO, while maintaining agreement with empirical data.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physletb.2019.134863](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.physletb.2019.134863).

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