System-Size Independence of Directed Flow Measured at the BNL Relativistic Heavy-Ion Collider


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System-Size Independence of Directed Flow Measured at the BNL Relativistic Heavy-Ion Collider


(STAR Collaboration)

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We measure directed flow ($v_1$) for charged particles in $\text{Au} + \text{Au}$ and $\text{Cu} + \text{Cu}$ collisions at $\sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200$ and 62.4 GeV, as a function of pseudorapidity ($\eta$), transverse momentum ($p_t$), and collision centrality, based on data from the STAR experiment. We find that the directed flow depends on the incident energy but, contrary to all available model implementations, not on the size of the colliding system at a given centrality. We extend the validity of the limiting fragmentation concept to $v_1$ in different collision systems, and investigate possible explanations for the observed sign change in $v_1(p_t)$. 

The heavy-ion program at the Relativistic Heavy-Ion Collider (RHIC) seeks to understand the nature and dynamics of strongly interacting matter under extreme conditions. It is widely expected that in collisions at RHIC, a new partonic phase of matter is created, strongly interacting quark gluon plasma [1]. In particular, its bulk nature is revealed in strong elliptic flow, which in central collisions approaches the predictions of ideal hydrodynamics, assuming system thermalization on an extremely short time scale (\(\sim 0.5 \text{ fm}/c\)) [2]. However, the mechanism behind such rapid thermalization remains far from clear and is under active theoretical study [3–5]. This may be related to rapid thermalization on an extremely short time scale (\(\sim 0.5 \text{ fm}/c\)) [2]. However, the mechanism behind such rapid thermalization remains far from clear and is under active theoretical study [3–5]. This may be related to another novel phenomenon that could be relevant at RHIC—saturation of the gluon distribution—which characterizes the nuclear parton distribution prior to collision [6]. Various theoretical approaches to connect collision geometry, saturated gluon distributions, and the onset of bulk collective behavior are being explored [2]; more experimental input would guide these efforts.

Directed flow refers to collective sidewards deflection of particles and is characterized by a first-order experimental input would guide these efforts. This may be related to rapid thermalization remains far from clear and is under active theoretical study [3–5]. This may be related to another novel phenomenon that could be relevant at RHIC—saturation of the gluon distribution—which characterizes the nuclear parton distribution prior to collision [6]. Various theoretical approaches to connect collision geometry, saturated gluon distributions, and the onset of bulk collective behavior are being explored [2]; more experimental input would guide these efforts.

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shows, on expanded scales, the mid-$\eta$ region measured by the main TPC, where $v_1$ is resolvable below the 0.1% level. Within the studied $\eta$ range, the sign of charged particle $v_1$ is opposite to that of the spectators, and the $v_1$ magnitude increases from central to peripheral collisions. For 0%–5% centrality, the slope $dv_1/d\eta$ changes sign above the middle of the forward time projection chamber (FTPC) pseudorapidity acceptance, and our results agree with the pattern reported by PHOBOS over a broader $\eta$ range [17,18].

The ratio $\langle p_x \rangle/\langle p_y \rangle$ is shown in Fig. 1 for the most central data (0%–5%), in comparison to $v_1$. Here, $p_x$ refers to the in-plane component of a track’s transverse momentum, a quantity commonly used prior to the 1990s [10]. As elaborated below, there is interest in the behavior of both $v_1$ and $\langle p_x \rangle$ when $v_1(p_y)$ changes sign.

To further examine $v_1$, the 200 GeV Au + Au data are divided into bins of $p_y$ (Fig. 2). The upper and lower panels show results from the main TPC and the FTPCs, respectively. In the main TPC, $v_1(p_y)$ crosses zero at $1 < p_y < 2$ GeV/c for central and midcentral collisions. A zero-crossing behavior in $v_1(p_y)$ is necessarily exhibited by a hydrodynamic calculation in which $p_y$, presumably imparted during the passing time of the initial-state nuclei, has been neglected and set equal to zero [19]. Because of the poor momentum resolution of the FTPCs at higher $p_y$, we cannot test the zero crossing at forward $\eta$. It is noteworthy that the observed $\langle p_x \rangle$, presented in Fig. 1, is far from negligible, which contradicts the assumptions used in the hydrodynamic calculations.

The observed $v_1(p_y)$ dependence can be explained by assuming that pions and baryons flow with opposite sign, coupled with the measured baryon enhancement at higher $p_y$ [20]. For example, taking linear functions [21] for pion and baryon $v_1(p_t)$, we obtain a satisfactory description of our data (see the solid curve in Fig. 2) with pion $v_1$ slopes, $dv_1/dp_y = -0.18 \pm 0.02$, $-0.34 \pm 0.02$, and $-0.52 \pm 0.04$, and baryon $v_1$ slopes $0.56 \pm 0.12$, $0.86 \pm 0.10$, and $1.02 \pm 0.12$ for centralities 0%–5%, 5%–40%, and 40%–80%, respectively. Note that the opposite $v_1$ slope for pions and protons, with the magnitude of proton slopes being larger, in this case is consistent with calculations [22] where the “wiggle” rapidity dependence of identified particles has been predicted to result from the interplay of stopping and radial flow. Currently, we are unable to test the wiggle effect in $v_1(y)$ with identified particles due to limited statistics and limited particle identification.

To study the energy and system-size dependence of $v_1$, Fig. 3 shows Cu + Cu data compared to Au + Au in the centrality range 30%–60% for both 200 and 62.4 GeV. There is a clear trend for $v_1(\eta)$ to decrease with increasing beam energy for both Au + Au and Cu + Cu. In the studied pseudorapidity and centrality range, $v_1(\eta)$ is, within errors, independent of the system size at each beam energy, despite the three-to-one mass ratio between gold and copper. This remarkable feature holds for almost all centrality bins studied, as shown in Fig. 4, and persists even near mid-$\eta$ (as shown in the upper panel), where elliptic flow ($v_2$) of charged particles in Cu + Cu is con-
siderably lower than in Au + Au [23]. Unlike \( v_2/\epsilon \), the ratio of the elliptic flow to the system initial eccentricity, which scales with the particle density in the transverse plane \( (1/S)\,dN_{ch}/dy \) [24] (also interpreted to be the mid-rapidity area density [25] or the system length [26]), \( v_1(\eta) \) at a given centrality is found to be independent of the system size, and varies only with the incident energy. The different scalings for \( v_2/\epsilon \) and \( v_1 \) might arise from the way in which they are developed: to produce \( v_2 \), many momentum exchanges among particles must occur (and the number of momentum exchanges is related to the participant density and the dimensions of the system), while to produce \( v_1 \), an important feature of the collision process is that different rapidity losses need to occur (related to the incident energy) for particles at different distances from the center of the participant zone [22].

The hybrid transport model AMPT (a multiphase transport model) [27] lies consistently below the measured data, as evident from Fig. 3. STAR’s prior \( v_1 \) study [11] in Au + Au at 62 GeV also showed this trend for AMPT and other transport models. It is noteworthy that AMPT does not exhibit the observed pattern of system-size independence. UrQMD (ultrarelativistic quantum molecular dynamics) [28] (not shown here) is similar to AMPT in exhibiting a significant change in \( v_1 \) between Au + Au and Cu + Cu.

Further scaling behavior is seen by transforming the data presented in Fig. 3 into the projectile frame (see Fig. 5), where zero on the horizontal axis corresponds to the beam rapidity, \( y_{beam} \), for each of the collision energies. Within three units from \( y_{beam} \), most data points lie on a universal curve for \( v_1 \) versus \( \eta - y_{beam} \). This incident-energy scaling of directed flow has previously been reported for Au + Au [11,18], and it is now evident that the limiting fragmentation hypothesis [29] holds even for much lighter collision systems like Cu + Cu. AMPT adheres less closely to limiting fragmentation for Cu + Cu. Note that the quantity \( \eta - y_{beam} \) introduces some uncertainty due to the use of \( \eta \) instead of rapidity; the latter requires particle identification. The system-size independence at a given fractional cross section and longitudinal scaling of scaled multiplicity distributions, \( dN_{ch}/d\eta/(N_{part}/2) \), have been previously reported by the PHOBOS Collaboration [30].

In summary, we have presented measurements of charged-particle directed flow as a function of \( p_t \), \( \eta \), and centrality in Au + Au and Cu + Cu collisions at \( \sqrt{s_{NN}} = 200 \) and 62.4 GeV. The observed trend of decreasing \( v_1 \) with increasing beam energy agrees with models. The lack of system-size dependence in \( v_1 \) for Au + Au and Cu + Cu is quite remarkable and is a feature not observed or predicted by any existing model implementation. The presented \( \eta \) dependence of \( v_1 \) provides further support for limiting fragmentation scaling by extending its applicability to Cu + Cu. The observed \( p_t \) dependence of directed flow motivates further theoretical investigations and experimental measurements with identified particles.

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FIG. 4 (color online). Charged particle \( v_1 \) versus centrality, for Au + Au and Cu + Cu at 200 and 62.4 GeV. The upper (lower) panels show results from the main TPC (FTPC). The plotted error bars are statistical, and systematic errors (see Figs. 1 and 5) are within 10%.

FIG. 5 (color online). Charged particle \( v_1 \) versus \( \eta - y_{beam} \), for 30%–60% Au + Au and Cu + Cu at 200 and 62.4 GeV. The plotted error bars are statistical, and the shaded bars show systematic errors.
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