Observational Constraints on Loop Quantum Cosmology

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In the inflationary scenario of loop quantum cosmology in the presence of inverse-volume corrections, we give analytic formulas for the power spectra of scalar and tensor perturbations convenient to compare with observations. Since inverse-volume corrections can provide strong contributions to the running spectral indices, inclusion of terms higher than the second-order runnings in the power spectra is crucially important. Using the recent data of cosmic microwave background and other cosmological experiments, we place bounds on the quantum corrections.

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One of the motivations to search for a quantum theory of gravity is the desire to unify general relativity with quantum mechanics and, thereby, resolve classical singularities such as the big bang or those associated with black holes. Observational implications of quantum gravity, however, present a delicate issue. Based on dimensional grounds, cosmology in a nearly isotropic setting seems to allow quantum corrections only as powers of the small quantity $\ell_\text{Pl} H = 10^{-10}$, where $\ell_\text{Pl}$ is the Planck length and $H^{-1} = \dot{a}/a$ is the Hubble radius ($a$ is the scale factor in the flat Friedmann-Robertson-Walker background and dots denote derivatives with respect to cosmic time $t$). This dimensional argument is supported by low-energy effective actions of higher-curvature type.

Dimensional arguments, generally, are overcome if there are more than two dynamical scales of the same dimension. Detailed physics rather than rough estimates are then required to determine which geometric mean of the scales is relevant in a given regime. In cosmology, an additional distance scale $L$ would allow a multitude of dimensionless combinations $\ell_\text{Pl}^a H^\beta L^\gamma$ with $\alpha - \beta + \gamma = 0$, not all of them small. Quantum gravity provides ample motivation for the existence of a third scale by suggesting discrete spatial structures. While the discreteness scale $L$ is often expected to be near $\ell_\text{Pl}$, it is not identical to it and also depends on excitation levels of states (rather than just Newton’s and Planck’s constants).

One explicit formulation of such a discrete version of gravity is loop quantum gravity (LQG) [1]. Discreteness arises on the space of metrics (geometrical operators acquiring discrete spectra). In a nearly homogeneous quantum space-time, one can think of any region of volume $V$ to consist of discrete patches, each roughly of size $L^3$ with the length $L$ determined by an underlying quantum-gravity state. Discrete spectra imply that derivatives by $L$, as they ubiquitously appear in canonical expressions via Poisson brackets, are replaced by finite difference quotients. As a simple example for so-called inverse-volume corrections, $(2\sqrt{L})^{-1} = d\sqrt{L}/dL$ would, when evaluated for discrete operators, become $(\sqrt{L + \ell_\text{Pl}} - \sqrt{L})/2\ell_\text{Pl}$, which strongly differs from $(2\sqrt{L})^{-1}$ for $L \ll \ell_\text{Pl}$. For larger $L$, corrections are perturbative and of the order $\ell_\text{Pl}/L$; no factor of $H$ appears. The ratio $\ell_\text{Pl}/L$ can easily be much larger than $\ell_\text{Pl} H$, explaining why this type of discreteness could give rise to stronger quantum effects.

The results of detailed constructions in LQG, following [2,3], will be summarized momentarily. First, we emphasize that the discreteness does not break general covariance in the equations used here (assuming small corrections). This has been demonstrated by an elaborate analysis of the gauge contents of the quantum-corrected theory; verifying the existence of a closed algebra of gauge generators [4]. Covariance, and the space-time structure it belongs to, is then not destroyed but deformed. (Deformations of classical symmetries play an important role in several approaches to quantum-gravity phenomenology [5]. The deformations considered here are on a different footing, however, because they do not refer just to Poincaré transformations of Minkowski space.)

Here, using currently available data, we place constraints on inverse-volume corrections for inflation. Since scalar and tensor perturbations are subject to strong modifications of the power on large scales, the corrections are bounded from above. A detection of gravitational waves and the precise measurement of cosmic microwave background (CMB) anisotropies in future observations such as Planck will potentially allow us to make a decisive test for loop quantum cosmology (LQC) inflation.

A simplified implementation of corrections expected from LQG in cosmological scenarios via perturbations around homogeneous or other reduced models can be achieved in LQC [6]. With a phenomenological approach to effective dynamics, the cosmological equations can be summarized in a single Mukhanov equation for the
The quantum corrections are characterized by (i) numerical coefficients $\alpha_0$ and $\chi$ and (ii) the function $\delta_{\text{Pl}} \propto a^{-\sigma}$ determining the size of inverse-volume corrections. The values of $\alpha_0$, $\chi$, and $\sigma$ are currently subject to quantization ambiguities. $\chi$ is parametrized as $\chi = \sigma \nu_0(\sigma/6 + 1)/3 + \alpha_0(5 - \sigma/3)/2$, where $\nu_0$ is related to $\alpha_0$ and $\sigma$ by the consistency condition [3]

$$n_s - 1 = -6\epsilon_v + 2\eta_v - c_{nt} \delta_{\text{Pl}}, \quad n_l = -2\epsilon_v - c_{nl} \delta_{\text{Pl}}.$$  

(4)

With quantum-gravity corrections $c_{nt} \equiv f_s,t \cdots$ whose dominant contributions are $f_s \equiv \sigma [3\alpha_0(13\epsilon - 3) + \nu_0(6 + 11\sigma)]/[18(\sigma + 1)]$ and $f_t = 2\sigma^2 \alpha_0/(\alpha + 1)$. For $\sigma \approx O(1)$ the variation of $\delta_{\text{Pl}}$ is fast ($\delta_{\text{Pl}} \propto a^{-\sigma} \propto k^{-\sigma}$ at Hubble crossing), so that $f_s,t$ provide dominant contributions to the scalar and tensor runnings as well, $\alpha_{s,t}(k_0) = d\ln k_0/d\ln k_0 = \sigma f_{s,t} \delta_{\text{Pl}}(k_0)$. Similarly, the $m$th order terms are $\alpha_{s,t}^{(m)}(k_0) = (-1)^m \sigma^m f_{s,t} \delta_{\text{Pl}}(k_0)$, and hence we can evaluate the sum in Eq. (3) as

$$\sum_{m=3}^{\infty} \frac{\alpha_{s,t}^{(m)}(k_0)}{m!} \chi_m = \left[ x \left(1 - \frac{1}{2} \sigma x \right) + \frac{e^{-\sigma x} - 1}{\sigma} \right] f_{s,t} \delta_{\text{Pl}}.$$  

(5)

This expression is valid for any value of $\sigma$ and of the pivot scale $k_0$ within the observational range of CMB. Since the LQC corrections to the runnings $\alpha_{s,t}$ can be large, inclusion of the higher-order terms (5) is important to estimate the power spectra properly.

For the CMB likelihood analysis we also take into account the second-order terms of slow-roll parameters, i.e., $\epsilon_s = -24\epsilon_v + 16\epsilon_v \eta_v - 2\xi_v + c_{nt} \delta_{\text{Pl}}$ and $\alpha_s = -4\epsilon_v (2\epsilon_v - \eta_v) + c_{nt} \delta_{\text{Pl}}$, where the dominant contributions to $c_{nt}$ correspond to $c_{nt} \equiv \sigma f_{s,t} \delta_{\text{Pl}}$. In the numerical code, the full expressions of the coefficients $c_{nt}$ and $c_{nt}$ [8] are used. At the pivot scale $k_0$ we have the tensor-to-scalar ratio $r(k_0) \equiv P_s(k_0)/P_t(k_0) = 16\epsilon_v k_0 + c_t \delta_{\text{Pl}}(k_0)$, where $c_t = 8[3\alpha_0(3 + 5\epsilon + 6\sigma^2 - \nu_0(6 + 11\sigma))]\epsilon_v(k_0)/[9(\sigma + 1)] - 16\sigma \alpha_0 \eta_v(\sigma + 1)$. In the quasi-de Sitter background, $\delta_{\text{Pl}} \propto k^{-\sigma}$ gives the relation $\delta_{\text{Pl}}(k) = \delta_{\text{Pl}}(k_0)(k/k_0)^{-\sigma} = \delta_{\text{Pl}}(k_0)(\ell/k_0)^{-\sigma}$, where $\ell$ are the multipole modes related to $k$ via

$$P_s = \frac{GH^2}{2\pi} (1 + \gamma_s \delta_{\text{Pl}}), \quad P_t = \frac{16GH^2}{2\pi} (1 + \gamma_t \delta_{\text{Pl}}).$$  

(2)
In the likelihood analysis, we vary the following eight parameters: (i) baryon density today, \( \Omega_b \), (ii) dark matter density today, \( \Omega_c \), (iii) the ratio of the sound horizon to the angular diameter distance, \( \theta \), (iv) the reionization optical depth, \( \tau \), (v) \( \delta(k_0) \), (vi) \( \epsilon_V(k_0) \), (vii) \( P_s(k_0) \), and (viii) the Sunyaev-Zel’dovich amplitude, \( A_{\mathrm{SZ}} \). We take the pivot wave number \( k_0 = 0.002 \text{ Mpc}^{-1} \) (\( \ell_0 = 29 \)) used by the WMAP team. \( \delta(k_0) \) and \( \epsilon_V(k_0) \) are constrained at this scale. While the bound on \( \delta \) depends on the pivot scale (and it tends to be smaller for larger \( k_0 \)), that on \( (k_0)^\alpha \delta(k_0) \) does not.

While we assume a standard treatment of the reionization with a smooth interpolation, more general reionization scenarios can potentially affect constraints on observables especially for \( n_s > 1 \) [11]. The analysis in [11] shows that the allowed region with \( n_s < 1 \) is not strongly modified, which is the case for our potentials.

The exponential term \( e^{-\sigma \delta} = (k_0/k)\delta \) in Eq. (5) gives rise to the enhancement of the power spectra on large scales, as we see in Fig. 1. In this sense the LQC corrections can be distinguished from the suppression effects coming from the noncommutative geometry or string corrections [12]. For \( \sigma \geq 3 \), the growth of the term \( e^{-\sigma \delta} \) is so significant that \( \delta_p(\ell) \) must be very much smaller than 1 for most of the scales observed in the CMB, in order to satisfy the bound \( \delta_p(\ell = 2) \ll 1 \). More precisely, LQC corrections manifest themselves mainly at \( \ell = 2, 3 \), where cosmic variance dominates, so it seems implausible to isolate these effects. For \( \sigma < 3 \), the LQC modification to the classical power spectra also affects larger multipoles \( \ell \), and hence it is possible to constrain it from CMB anisotropies.

In Fig. 2 we plot the 2D posterior distributions on the parameters \( \delta(k_0) \) and \( \epsilon_V(k_0) \) with \( k_0 = 0.002 \text{ Mpc}^{-1} \). For \( n = 2 \) and \( \sigma = 2 \), the two parameters are constrained to be \( \delta(k_0) < 6.7 \times 10^{-5} \) and \( \epsilon_V(k_0) < 0.013 \) (95% C.L.). The modification of the large-scale power spectra (\( \ell \leq 20 \)) shown in Fig. 1 leads to the upper bound on \( \delta(k_0) \). The condition (6) gives the prior \( \delta_p(\ell_0) \ll 4.8 \times 10^{-2} \) at \( \ell_0 = 29 \), so that for \( \alpha_0 = O(1) \) the observational bound is smaller by 2 orders of magnitude. For larger \( k_0 \) the observational upper bounds on \( \delta(k_0) \) tend to be smaller for given \( \sigma \). For \( k_0 = 0.05 \text{ Mpc}^{-1} \) and \( \sigma = 2 \), we find that \( \delta(k_0) < 1.2 \times 10^{-7} \) (95% C.L.), in which case the theoretical expected amplitude \( [\delta_p(k_0) \sim 10^{-8}] \) or a few orders of magnitude higher [3] can be accessible.

For smaller \( \sigma \) the observational upper bound on \( \delta(k_0) \) tends to be larger, with milder enhancement of the power spectra on large scales. In Fig. 3 we show the likelihood results for \( \sigma = 1 \), in which case the LQC correction is constrained to be \( \delta(k_0) < 3.6 \times 10^{-2} \) (95% C.L.). Meanwhile, the \textit{a priori} criterion (6) gives \( \delta_p(k_0) \ll 6.9 \times 10^{-2} \). For \( \alpha_0 = O(1) \), the case \( \sigma = 1 \) is marginally consistent with the combined SR/\( \delta_p \) truncation.
For $\sigma \leq 1$, the exponential factor $e^{-\sigma x}$ does not change rapidly with smaller values of $f_{x,1}$, so that the LQC effect on the power spectra would not be very significant even if $\delta(k_0)$ was as large as $\epsilon_V(k_0)$. Our likelihood analysis shows that the observational upper bound on $\delta(k_0)$ exceeds the a priori upper limit of $\delta_{pi}(k_0)$ given by Eq. (6). Since $\delta(k_0)$ can be as large as 1, the validity of the approximation $\delta(k_0) < \epsilon_V(k_0)$ used in the main formulas may break down in such cases.

Under the conditions $\epsilon_V, \delta \ll 1$, it follows that $\epsilon_V = (x^2/2)(\dot{\varphi}/H)$. Then the number of $e$-foldings during inflation is given by $N = \int \dot{\varphi}d\bar{H} = \kappa \int \delta \varphi / \sqrt{2\epsilon_V}$.  

where $\varphi(f)$ is the field value at the end of inflation [determined by the condition $\epsilon_V = O(1)$]. For the power-law potentials one has $N = n/(4\epsilon_V) - n/4$, which gives $\epsilon_V = n/(4N + n)$. For $n = 2$, the theoretically constrained range 45 $< N < 65$ corresponds to 0.008 $< \epsilon_V < 0.011$. The probability distributions of $\epsilon_V$ in Figs. 2 and 3 are consistent with this range even in the presence of the LQC corrections, so the quadratic potential is compatible with observations as in standard cosmology.

In summary, in inflation combined with LQC inverse-volume corrections we provided general formulas for the scalar and tensor power spectra and placed observational bounds on the size of corrections for a quadratic potential. In [8] we ran the COSMOMC code also for other potentials such as $V \propto \varphi^4$ and $V \propto e^{-\lambda \varphi}$ (for which the inflationary observables reduce, again, to $\delta$ and $\epsilon_V$). We found that the observational upper bounds are practically independent of the inflaton potentials. This is because the LQC correction is approximately given by $\delta_{pl}(k) = \delta_{pl}(k_0)(k/k_0)^{-\sigma}$, which only depends on $\sigma$ and the pivot scale $k_0$. Interesting and nontrivial effects do arise from the modified space-time structure underlying the dynamics. Even though quantum-geometry corrections are small, they can significantly change the runnings of spectral indices. Thus, the observational bounds on $\delta_{pi}$ can be much closer to theoretical values $[O(10^{-8})]$ than often thought in quantum gravity. Our new techniques set the stage for systematic and stringent phenomenological evaluations.

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