

## High-Energy Vacuum Birefringence and Dichroism in an Ultrastrong Laser Field

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A long-standing prediction of quantum electrodynamics, yet to be experimentally observed, is the interaction between real photons in vacuum. As a consequence of this interaction, the vacuum is expected to become birefringent and dichroic if a strong laser field polarizes its virtual particle–antiparticle dipoles. Here, we derive how a generally polarized probe photon beam is influenced by both vacuum birefringence and dichroism in a strong linearly polarized plane-wave laser field. Furthermore, we consider an experimental scheme to measure these effects in the nonperturbative high-energy regime, where the Euler-Heisenberg approximation breaks down. By employing circularly polarized high-energy probe photons, as opposed to the conventionally considered linearly polarized ones, the feasibility of quantitatively confirming the prediction of nonlinear QED for vacuum birefringence at the  $5\sigma$  confidence level on the time scale of a few days is demonstrated for upcoming 10 PW laser systems. Finally, dichroism and anomalous dispersion in vacuum are shown to be accessible at these facilities.

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In the realm of classical electrodynamics, the electromagnetic field experiences no self-interaction in vacuum [1]. According to quantum electrodynamics (QED), however, a finite photon-photon coupling is induced by the presence of virtual charged particles in the vacuum [2]. For low-frequency electromagnetic fields  $F^{\mu\nu}$ , such vacuum polarization effects are described by the Euler-Heisenberg Lagrangian density [3–6]. Below the QED critical field  $E_{\text{cr}} = m^2/|e| \approx 1.3 \times 10^{18}$  V/m, low-frequency vacuum polarization effects are suppressed [7–12] and the density is given by

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{EM}} = -\mathcal{F} + \frac{\alpha}{90\pi E_{\text{cr}}^2} (4\mathcal{F}^2 + 7\mathcal{G}^2) + \dots, \quad (1)$$

where  $\mathcal{F} = F_{\mu\nu}F^{\mu\nu}/4$  and  $\mathcal{G} = \tilde{F}_{\mu\nu}F^{\mu\nu}/4$  are the electromagnetic field invariants [13].

The Euler-Heisenberg Lagrangian predicts that the vacuum resembles a birefringent medium [14–17]. The smallness of the QED prediction for the light-by-light scattering cross section in the low-energy regime opens up the possibility to search for physics beyond the standard model, e.g., axionlike or minicharged particles and paraxions, by measuring optical vacuum polarization effects [18–22], see also [23,24].

Recent astronomical observations hint at the existence of vacuum birefringence [25] (see also the remarks in [26,27]). However, a direct laboratory-based verification of this fundamental property of the vacuum is still missing. Laboratory experiments like BFRT [28], BMV [29], PVLAS [30], and Q&A [31] have so far employed magnetic fields to polarize the vacuum and optical photons to probe it, though without reaching the required sensitivity.

The strongest electromagnetic fields of macroscopic extent are nowadays produced by lasers. However, even

the intensities  $I \sim 10^{23}$  W/cm<sup>2</sup> envisaged for future 10 PW-class optical lasers [32,33] are still well below the critical intensity  $I_{\text{cr}} = E_{\text{cr}}^2 \approx 4.6 \times 10^{29}$  W/cm<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the leading-order correction given in Eq. (1) is sufficient to describe low-frequency vacuum polarization effects. Recently, various setups have been considered to measure them [34–52], but all suggested experiments will remain challenging in the foreseeable future.

As the light-by-light scattering cross section attains its maximum at the pair-production threshold [2], it is natural to consider high-energy photons to probe vacuum birefringence [53–58]. A photon four-momentum  $q^\mu$  ( $q^0 = \omega$ ,  $q^2 = 0$ ) allows us to construct a third invariant, the quantum nonlinearity parameter (see [2], § 101)

$$\chi = \frac{\sqrt{-(f^{\mu\nu}q_\nu)^2}}{E_{\text{cr}}m} \approx 0.5741 \frac{\omega}{\text{GeV}} \sqrt{\frac{I}{10^{22} \text{ W/cm}^2}} \quad (2)$$

[for a plane-wave background field with amplitude  $f^{\mu\nu}$  and phase-dependent pulse shape  $\psi'(\phi)$ , i.e.,  $F^{\mu\nu} = f^{\mu\nu}\psi'(\phi)$ , details are given below; the last relation in Eq. (2) assumes a head-on collision]. As gamma photons with energies  $\omega \gtrsim 1$  GeV are obtainable from Compton backscattering [2,59–62], the regime  $\chi \sim 1$  is attainable in future laser-based vacuum birefringence experiments.

In the nonperturbative regime  $\chi \gtrsim 1$ , the Euler-Heisenberg approximation is no longer applicable, as it neglects the contribution of the probe photon momentum, which flows in the electron-positron loop [see Fig. 1(a)]. Instead, the polarization operator in the background field must be employed [see Fig. 1(b)]. For low-energy photons, both objects in Fig. 1 are related by functional derivatives [14]. The regime  $\chi \gtrsim 1$  is qualitatively different from the

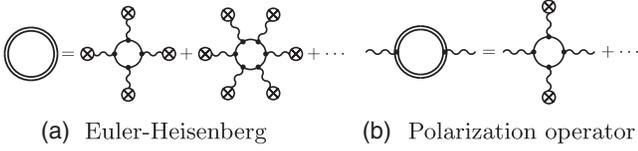


FIG. 1. The Euler-Heisenberg effective action is only valid for approximately constant fields (denoted by a wiggly line with a cross). The polarization operator must be considered if the momentum of the probe photon (wiggly line) becomes influential ( $\chi \gtrsim 1$ ). Here, a solid double line denotes the exact electron propagator inside a classical background field.

one where the Euler-Heisenberg approximation is valid, in particular, due to the following two reasons: (1) electron-positron photoproduction becomes sizable, and thus, the vacuum acquires dichroic properties; (2) the vacuum exhibits anomalous dispersion [11,56,63–65].

In this Letter, we put forward an experimental scheme to measure high-energy vacuum birefringence and dichroism in the nontrivial regime  $\chi \gtrsim 1$ . It is based on Compton backscattering to produce polarized gamma photons and exploits pair production in matter to determine the polarization state of the probe photon after it has interacted with a linearly polarized strong laser pulse. By analyzing the consecutive stages of this type of experiment, we show that for vacuum birefringence, the required measurement time is reduced by two orders of magnitude if a circularly polarized probe photon beam is employed (hitherto, only linearly polarized probe gamma photons have been considered for setups similar to ours [53–56,66]).

Assuming conservative experimental parameters, we demonstrate that with this type of setup and the observables we introduce [see Eq. (13)], the quantitative verification of the strong-field QED prediction for vacuum birefringence and dichroism is feasible with an average statistical significance of  $5\sigma$  on the time scale of a few days at upcoming 10 PW laser facilities.

In the following, we consider a linearly polarized plane-wave laser pulse, described by the four-potential  $A^\mu(kx) = a^\mu \psi(kx)$ . Here,  $x^\mu$  is the position four-vector,  $k^\mu$  is a characteristic laser photon four-momentum ( $k^0 = \omega_L$ ,  $k^2 = 0$ ),  $a^\mu$  characterizes the amplitude of the field ( $a^2 < 0$ ,  $ka = 0$ ,  $f^{\mu\nu} = k^\mu a^\nu - k^\nu a^\mu$ ), and  $\psi(kx)$  defines its pulse shape ( $|\psi(kx)|, |\psi'(kx)| \lesssim 1$ ; a prime denotes the derivative of a function with respect to its argument).

A gauge- and Lorentz-invariant measure of the laser field strength is the classical intensity parameter [11]

$$\xi = \frac{|e|\sqrt{-a^2}}{m} \approx 0.7495 \frac{\text{eV}}{\omega_L} \sqrt{\frac{I}{10^{18} \text{ W/cm}^2}}. \quad (3)$$

Here, we focus on high-intensity optical lasers ( $I \gtrsim 10^{20} \text{ W/cm}^2$ ,  $\omega_L \sim 1 \text{ eV}$ ), i.e., the regime  $\xi \gg 1$ .

Inside a plane-wave background field, an incoming external photon line (see Fig. 2) in a Feynman diagram



FIG. 2. A background field changes the photon dispersion relation via radiative corrections induced by virtual particles [2]. Here, we neglect higher-order radiative corrections to the electron-positron loop as  $\alpha\chi^{2/3} \ll 1$  [11].

corresponds (up to normalization) to the function  $\Phi_q^\mu(x)$ , which is a solution of the Dyson equation [2,67] with initial condition  $\Phi_q^\mu(x) \rightarrow \Phi_q^{(0)\mu}(x) = \epsilon^{(0)\mu} e^{-iqx}$  as  $kx \rightarrow -\infty$  ( $\epsilon^{(0)}\epsilon^{(0)*} = -1$ ,  $q\epsilon^{(0)} = 0$ ). After applying the local constant field approximation (valid if  $\xi \gg 1$ ) and following [67], we find that to leading order,  $\Phi_q^\mu(x)$  is given by (see also [18,56,64,65])

$$\Phi_q^\mu(x) = \epsilon^\mu(kx) e^{-iqx}, \quad \epsilon^\mu(kx) = \sum_{i=1,2} c_i(kx) \Lambda_i^\mu, \quad (4)$$

where

$$\epsilon^\mu(kx \rightarrow -\infty) = \epsilon^{(0)\mu} = \sum_{i=1,2} c_i^{(0)} \Lambda_i^\mu, \quad (5)$$

and  $\Lambda_1^\mu = f^{\mu\nu} q_\nu / \sqrt{qf^2 q}$ ,  $\Lambda_2^\mu = -\tilde{f}^{\mu\nu} q_\nu / \sqrt{qf^2 q}$  ( $q\Lambda_i = k\Lambda_i = 0$ ,  $\Lambda_i\Lambda_j = -\delta_{ij}$ ; note that  $\Lambda_2^\mu$  is actually a pseudo four-vector) [67–69]. The coefficients  $c_i(kx)$  and  $c_i^{(0)}$  are connected via

$$c_i(kx) = c_i^{(0)} \exp[i\phi_i(kx) - \lambda_i(kx)], \quad (6)$$

where

$$\begin{bmatrix} \phi_i(kx) \\ \lambda_i(kx) \end{bmatrix} = -\frac{1}{2kq} \int_{-\infty}^{kx} d\phi \begin{bmatrix} \text{Re}[p_i(\phi, \chi)] \\ \text{Im}[p_i(\phi, \chi)] \end{bmatrix}, \quad (7)$$

[we refer to  $\phi_i = \phi_i(kx \rightarrow \infty)$  as phase shifts and to  $\lambda_i = \lambda_i(kx \rightarrow \infty)$  as decay parameters] with

$$\begin{bmatrix} p_1(kx, \chi) \\ p_2(kx, \chi) \end{bmatrix} = \frac{\alpha m^2}{3\pi} \int_{-1}^{+1} dv \begin{bmatrix} (w-1) \\ (w+2) \end{bmatrix} \frac{f'(u)}{u}, \quad (8)$$

$w = 4/(1-v^2)$ ,  $u = [w/\chi(kx)]^{2/3}$ ,  $\chi(kx) = \chi|\psi'(kx)|$ , and  $f(u) = \pi[\text{Gi}(u) + i\text{Ai}(u)]$  [11,70].

In order to extend the above result from a single photon to a photon beam (which is, in general, not in a pure polarization state), we introduce the following density tensors, which describe the initial ( $\varrho^{(0)\mu\nu}$ ) and the final ( $\varrho^{\mu\nu}$ ) polarization state of the beam [2,71,72]

$$\begin{aligned} \varrho^{(0)\mu\nu} &= \sum_a w_a \epsilon_a^{(0)\mu} \epsilon_a^{(0)*\nu} = \sum_{i,j=1,2} \rho_{ij}^{(0)} \Lambda_i^\mu \Lambda_j^\nu, \\ \varrho^{\mu\nu} &= \sum_a w_a \epsilon_a^\mu \epsilon_a^{*\nu} = \sum_{i,j=1,2} \rho_{ij} \Lambda_i^\mu \Lambda_j^\nu. \end{aligned} \quad (9)$$

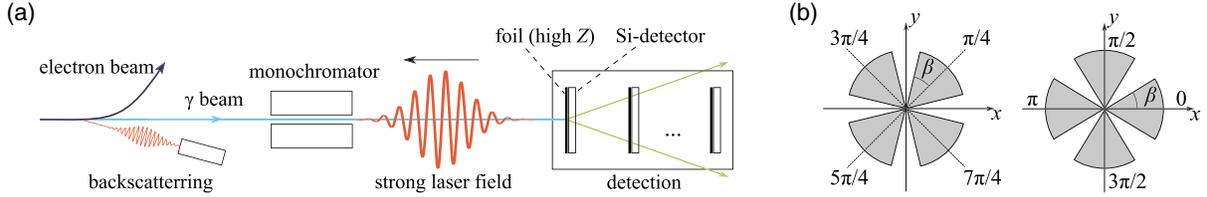


FIG. 3. (a) Experimental setup. Polarized highly energetic gamma photons (produced via Compton backscattering) propagate through a strong laser field, which induces vacuum birefringence and dichroism. Afterward, the gamma photons are converted into electron-positron pairs. From their azimuthal distribution, the polarization state is deduced. (b) Regions of the transverse plane (gray), which are used to define the observables  $R_B$  (left) and  $R_D$  (right) [see Eq. (13)].

Here,  $w_a$  represents the probability to find a photon with polarization four-vector  $\epsilon_a^{(0)\mu}$  ( $\epsilon_a^\mu$ ) in the initial (final) beam.

Using the identity matrix  $\mathbf{I}$  and the Pauli matrices  $\boldsymbol{\sigma} = (\sigma_1, \sigma_2, \sigma_3)$  [2], we expand the initial ( $\rho_{ij}^{(0)}$ ) and the final ( $\rho_{ij}$ ) polarization density matrices as [2,71,72]

$$\rho^{(0)} = \frac{1}{2}(S_0^{(0)}\mathbf{I} + \mathbf{S}^{(0)}\boldsymbol{\sigma}), \quad \rho = \frac{1}{2}(S_0\mathbf{I} + \mathbf{S}\boldsymbol{\sigma}) \quad (10)$$

[ $\text{Tr}(\rho^{(0)}) = S_0^{(0)}$ ,  $\text{Tr}(\rho) = S_0$ ;  $S_0 \leq S_0^{(0)}$ , in general, as the photons can decay in the strong background field].

The real Stokes parameters  $S^{(0)} = \{S_0^{(0)}, \mathbf{S}^{(0)}\}$  [ $\mathbf{S}^{(0)} = (S_1^{(0)}, S_2^{(0)}, S_3^{(0)})$ ] and  $S = \{S_0, \mathbf{S}\}$  [ $\mathbf{S} = (S_1, S_2, S_3)$ ] completely characterize the initial (final) polarization state of the beam [72,73]. Therefore, the following relations describe any possible vacuum birefringence and/or dichroism experiment [see Eqs. (4), (6), (9), and (10)]

$$\begin{pmatrix} S_0 \\ S_3 \end{pmatrix} = e^{-(\lambda_1 + \lambda_2)} \begin{pmatrix} \cosh \delta\lambda & \sinh \delta\lambda \\ \sinh \delta\lambda & \cosh \delta\lambda \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} S_0^{(0)} \\ S_3^{(0)} \end{pmatrix},$$

$$\begin{pmatrix} S_1 \\ S_2 \end{pmatrix} = e^{-(\lambda_1 + \lambda_2)} \begin{pmatrix} \cos \delta\phi & -\sin \delta\phi \\ \sin \delta\phi & \cos \delta\phi \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} S_1^{(0)} \\ S_2^{(0)} \end{pmatrix}. \quad (11)$$

Here,  $\delta\phi = \phi_2 - \phi_1$  is related to vacuum birefringence and  $\delta\lambda = \lambda_2 - \lambda_1$  to vacuum dichroism.

In the following, we discuss possible high-energy vacuum birefringence and/or dichroism experiments [see Fig. 3(a)] at the Apollon facility (F1/F2 laser) [74], ELI-NP (two 10 PW lasers) [75,76], and ELI-Beamlines (ELI-BL; L3/L4 laser) [77]. At each facility, a 10 PW laser is employed to polarize the vacuum, and the second laser is utilized to produce electron bunches via laser wakefield acceleration [78,79]. We also consider a possible experiment (denoted as LINAC-L) at a conventional electron accelerator, e.g., the European XFEL [80], FACET-II [81], or SACLA [82], combined with a high-repetition (10 Hz) 1 PW laser. The parameters of the considered facilities are summarized in the Supplemental Material [83].

We assume that  $N_e = 10^8$  monoenergetic few-GeV electrons are used in one experimental cycle for the

generation of probe gamma photons via Compton backscattering.

For a rectangular pulse with  $N$  cycles  $\{\psi'(kx) = \sin(kx)$  if  $kx \in [-N\pi, N\pi]$  and  $\psi'(kx) = 0$  otherwise $\}$ , the relative phase shift  $\delta\phi$  depends only on  $\chi$  and  $\xi N$ ; it is plotted in Fig. 4. We conclude that  $|\delta\phi| \lesssim 0.1$  for upcoming laser systems in the regime  $0.1 \lesssim \chi < 1$ , where a clean vacuum birefringence measurement is feasible as pair production is exponentially suppressed. Notably, the quantity  $\delta\phi$  decreases with the increase of the probe photon energy for  $\chi \gtrsim 2.5$ , which characterizes the anomalous dispersion of the vacuum in this regime [11,56,63–65].

For obtaining better estimates as those given in Fig. 4, in the following, we employ a Gaussian pulse envelope  $\psi'(kx) = \exp[-(kx/\Delta\phi)^2] \sin(kx)$ , where  $\Delta\phi$  is related to the duration of the pulse  $\Delta t$  (FWHM of the intensity) via  $\Delta\phi = \omega_L \Delta t / \sqrt{2 \ln 2}$ . This pulse collides with  $N_\gamma = N_e \sigma_{\text{bs}} (I_{\text{bs}}/\omega_{\text{bs}}) \Delta t_{\text{bs}}$  gamma photons, where  $\sigma_{\text{bs}}$  is the cross section of Compton scattering [2], and the index “bs” indicates the parameters characterizing the backscattering process. To obtain a high degree of polarization, we consider only photons which are scattered in the region  $\theta \in (0, \theta_{\text{max}} \ll 1)$ , where  $\theta$  denotes the polar angle ( $\theta = 0$  corresponds to perfect backscattering) [2,59–62,83].

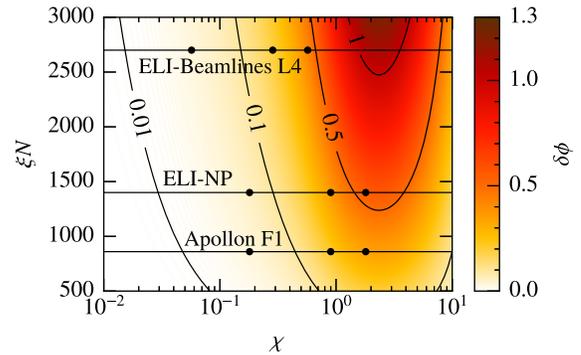


FIG. 4. Plot of  $\delta\phi$  as a function of  $\chi$  and  $\xi N$  for a rectangular pulse profile. For each of the three laser facilities, gamma photons with energy  $\omega = 0.1$  GeV (left point),  $\omega = 0.5$  GeV (central point), and  $\omega = 1$  GeV (right point) are indicated. Note that  $|\delta\phi| \gtrsim 0.1$  is also achievable by employing a longer PW laser pulse (e.g., National Ignition Facility with  $\Delta t = 3$  ns [32]) and probe photons with  $\omega \gtrsim 0.1$  GeV.

Below, we employ  $\Delta t_{\text{bs}} = \Delta t$ ,  $\omega_{\text{bs}} = 1.55$  eV, and  $I_{\text{bs}} = 4.3 \times 10^{16}$  W/cm<sup>2</sup> [considering linear Compton scattering is sufficient as  $\xi_{\text{bs}} = 0.1$  for this laser; see Eq. (3)].

One of the main experimental challenges is to analyze the final polarization state of the gamma photons. Here, we consider pair production in a screened Coulomb field of charge  $Z|e|$  [91–94]. The spin-summed pair production cross section is given by

$$d\sigma_{\text{pp}} = \frac{d\varphi}{2\pi} \{S_0\sigma_0 + [S_1 \sin(2\varphi) + S_3 \cos(2\varphi)]\sigma_1\}, \quad (12)$$

where  $\varphi$  denotes the azimuth angle of the electron momentum in the transverse plane. For  $\sigma_0$ ,  $\sigma_1$ , we use expressions exact in  $Z\alpha$  and valid for ultrarelativistic particles [83,93,94]. In the following, we assume a head-on collision [ $q^\mu = \omega(1, 0, 0, 1)$ ,  $k^\mu = \omega_L(1, 0, 0, -1)$ ,  $\Lambda_1^\mu = (0, 1, 0, 0)$ ,  $\Lambda_2^\mu = (0, 0, 1, 0)$ ], and tungsten ( $Z = 74$ ) as conversion material.

As the pair-production cross section is only sensitive to linear polarization [ $S_1$  and  $S_3$ , see Eq. (12)], we conclude from Eq. (11) that we need to utilize circularly polarized probe photons (e.g.,  $S^{(0)} = \{1, 0, -1, 0\}$ ) in order to obtain probabilities which depend on  $\delta\phi$  [rather than  $(\delta\phi)^2$ ] if  $|\delta\phi| \ll 1$  (see also [57,58]). Therefore, inverting the standard scheme by using circularly instead of linearly polarized probe photons is highly beneficial in the regime  $|\delta\phi| \lesssim 0.1$ .

From Eq. (11), we conclude that  $S_1$  is sensitive to vacuum birefringence ( $\delta\phi$ ), whereas  $S_3$  depends on vacuum dichroism ( $\delta\lambda$ ). To disentangle both effects, we introduce the following asymmetries:

$$R_B = \frac{(N_{\pi/4} + N_{5\pi/4}) - (N_{3\pi/4} + N_{7\pi/4})}{(N_{\pi/4} + N_{5\pi/4}) + (N_{3\pi/4} + N_{7\pi/4})},$$

$$R_D = \frac{(N_0 + N_\pi) - (N_{\pi/2} + N_{3\pi/2})}{(N_0 + N_\pi) + (N_{\pi/2} + N_{3\pi/2})}, \quad (13)$$

where  $N_{\beta_0}$  denotes the number of pairs detected in the azimuth angle range  $\varphi \in (\beta_0 - \beta, \beta_0 + \beta)$  of the transverse plane, with  $\beta$  being specified below [see Fig. 3(b)]. The expectation values of  $R_B$  and  $R_D$  are given by [see Eq. (12)]

$$\langle R_B \rangle = \frac{\sin(2\beta)}{2\beta} \frac{\sigma_1 S_1}{\sigma_0 S_0}, \quad \langle R_D \rangle = \frac{\sin(2\beta)}{2\beta} \frac{\sigma_1 S_3}{\sigma_0 S_0}. \quad (14)$$

In order to detect vacuum birefringence (dichroism) at the  $n\sigma$  confidence level on average, we require that the expectation value  $\langle R_B \rangle$  ( $\langle R_D \rangle$ ) differs from zero by  $n$  standard deviations. Therefore, we obtain the following expressions for the number of required incoming gamma photons (see Supplemental Material [83]):

$$N_\gamma^B = \frac{\pi n^2}{4\eta\beta S_0 \langle R_B \rangle^2}, \quad N_\gamma^D = \frac{\pi n^2}{4\eta\beta S_0 \langle R_D \rangle^2} \quad (15)$$

TABLE I. Duration of the experiment  $\tau$  at different facilities ( $\chi = 0.25$ ).  $S_0$  and  $S_1$ ,  $\langle R_B \rangle$ , and  $N_\gamma^B$  follow from Eq. (11), Eq. (14) and Eq. (15), respectively ( $S^{(0)} = \{1, 0, -1, 0\}$ ;  $5\sigma$  confidence level, i.e.,  $n = 5$ ). Note that the pair production probability in the strong laser field is much smaller than the conversion efficiency in the detector [ $(1 - S_0) \ll \eta = 10^{-2}$ ].

	$1 - S_0$	$S_1$	$\langle R_B \rangle$	$N_\gamma^B$	$\tau$
Apollon	$1.9 \times 10^{-5}$	0.06	$3.4 \times 10^{-3}$	$3.0 \times 10^8$	45 d
ELI-NP	$3.1 \times 10^{-5}$	0.09	$5.6 \times 10^{-3}$	$1.1 \times 10^8$	10 d
ELI-BL	$6.3 \times 10^{-5}$	0.18	$1.1 \times 10^{-2}$	$2.6 \times 10^7$	11 h
LINAC-L	$3.8 \times 10^{-6}$	0.01	$6.8 \times 10^{-4}$	$7.4 \times 10^9$	2 d

[by minimizing  $N_\gamma^B$  ( $N_\gamma^D$ ), we find the optimal angle  $\beta = \beta_{\text{opt}} \approx 0.58 \approx 33^\circ$  for both observables]. Here,  $\eta = n_z l \sigma_0$  denotes the photon to pair conversion efficiency ( $n_z$  and  $l$  are the number density and the thickness of the conversion material, respectively). The thickness of a conversion foil should be  $\lesssim 1$  milliradiation length (mRL), otherwise multiple Coulomb scattering affects the measured angle [91,93]. Supposing that several conversion foils alternating with silicon detectors are cascaded [95–97], we assume here  $\eta = 10^{-2}$  (i.e., an effective thickness of  $\sim 10$  mRL).

To obtain a clean vacuum birefringence experiment without real electron-positron pair production, we consider the case  $\chi = 0.25$ . The results for the four facilities under consideration are summarized in Table I. As expected from Fig. 4, ELI-Beamlines is the most suitable facility for carrying out the measurement in this regime (the expected measurement time is less than one day).

As the number of required gamma photons  $N_\gamma^B$  scales as  $\langle R_B \rangle^{-2}$  [see Eq. (15)], the use of circularly polarized probe photons instead of linearly polarized ones reduces the measurement time by a factor  $\approx 100$  ( $\delta\phi \approx 0.1$ , see Fig. 4).

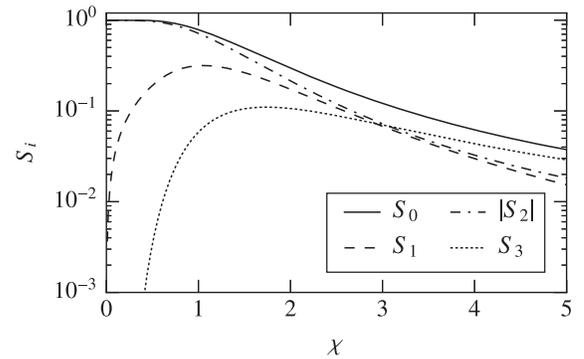


FIG. 5. Final Stokes parameters [see Eq. (11)] for gamma photons propagating through an ELI-NP 10 PW laser pulse ( $S^{(0)} = \{1, 0, -1, 0\}$ ). The strongest effect is obtained around  $\chi = 1$  (note that pair production becomes sizable for  $\chi \gtrsim 1$ ). As we consider the tunneling regime  $1/\xi \ll 1$ , cusplike structures—characteristic for multiphoton pair production [18,65]—are absent.

Finally, we consider the case  $\chi = 2.5$  (attainable, e.g., at ELI-NP by utilizing 8.4 GeV electrons for backscattering;  $\theta_{\max} = 7.6 \times 10^{-6}$ ,  $\sigma_{\text{bs}} = 0.135 r_e^2$ ,  $\omega = 1.4$  GeV,  $\sigma_1/\sigma_0 = 0.077$ ;  $r_e = \alpha/m = 2.818 \times 10^{-13}$  cm is the classical electron radius). In this regime, vacuum dichroism and anomalous dispersion come into play and the Euler-Heisenberg approximation breaks down completely (see Fig. 4), whereas the production of particles, heavier than electrons and positrons, and QCD corrections are still suppressed [98]. As the produced pairs radiate gamma photons, a discrimination of primary from secondary photons is necessary, e.g., via determination of the photon energy. For  $S^{(0)} = \{1, 0, -1, 0\}$ , we obtain that  $S = \{0.18, 0.11, -0.12, 0.09\}$  at ELI-NP (see Fig. 5). Correspondingly,  $\langle R_B \rangle = 3.6 \times 10^{-2}$  and  $\langle R_D \rangle = 3.0 \times 10^{-2}$ , implying a measurement time of 3-4 days [ $5\sigma$  confidence level, see Eq. (15)].

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