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Numerical Stability and Accuracy of Structure-Preserving Finite Element Schemes

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ABSTRACT

The numerical stability and accuracy of finite element methods are fundamental considerations determining the reliability and efficiency of computational simulations. This study presents a comprehensive analysis of stability and accuracy properties for structure-preserving finite element schemes based on finite element exterior calculus (FEEC). We establish rigorous stability results including coercivity estimates with constant $\alpha > 0$, inf-sup conditions with mesh-independent constant β, and energy preservation bounds for Hamiltonian systems. Accuracy analysis demonstrates optimal convergence rates $\| u - u_h \|_{H^1} = O(h^k)$ and $\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^{k+1})$ for degree-k elements, with superconvergence $O(h^{2k})$ at Gauss points. The framework encompasses elliptic, parabolic, and hyperbolic problems, with particular attention to saddle-point systems arising in incompressible flow and electromagnetics. Condition number analysis shows $\kappa(A) = O(h^{-2})$ for standard formulations, reduced to $O(1)$ with optimal preconditioning. Numerical experiments on benchmark problems—including the Stokes equations, Maxwell eigenvalue problems, and Hamiltonian systems—validate theoretical predictions and demonstrate the superior physical fidelity of structure-preserving approaches. We show that exact satisfaction of discrete constraints eliminates spurious modes, preserves conservation laws to machine precision, and enables long-time stability without artificial dissipation. Computational efficiency comparisons demonstrate that structure-preserving methods achieve target accuracy 20–40% faster than standard approaches despite increased per-element complexity.

Keywords: Numerical Stability, Finite Element Accuracy, Structure-Preserving Methods, Inf-Sup Condition, Convergence Analysis, Error Estimation, Conservation Laws, Computational Efficiency

1. INTRODUCTION

The numerical solution of partial differential equations through finite element methods requires careful attention to two fundamental properties: stability and accuracy [1], [2]. Stability ensures that small perturbations in data do not cause arbitrarily large changes in solutions, while

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accuracy quantifies how closely discrete solutions approximate continuous ones [3]. The interplay between these properties determines the overall reliability of computational simulations [4].

Classical stability theory for finite element methods is founded on variational principles. For an elliptic problem, stability requires coercivity of the bilinear form [5]:

$$a(u,u) \geq \alpha \parallel u \parallel_V^2 \qquad (1)$$

where $\alpha > 0$ is the coercivity constant and V is the trial space. This condition guarantees unique solvability and continuous dependence on data [6].

For saddle-point problems involving constraints, stability requires the Ladyzhenskaya-Babuška-Brezzi (LBB) or inf-sup condition [7]:

$$\inf_{q_h \in Q_h} \sup_{v_h \in V_h} \frac{b(v_h, q_h)}{\parallel v_h \parallel_V \parallel q_h \parallel_Q} \geq \beta > 0 \qquad (2)$$

The inf-sup constant β, crucially, must be independent of the mesh size h. Violation of this condition leads to spurious oscillations, locking, and non-convergent solutions [8].

Accuracy is typically measured through convergence rates. For a finite element space of polynomial degree k and mesh size h, optimal approximation gives [9]:

$$\parallel u - u_h \parallel_{L^2} \leq Ch^{k+1}|u|_{H^{k+1}} \qquad (3)$$

$$\parallel u - u_h \parallel_{H^1} \leq Ch^{k}|u|_{H^{k+1}} \qquad (4)$$

where C depends on the domain but not on h [10].

Structure-preserving methods achieve stability and accuracy through a fundamentally different mechanism. Rather than stabilizing through artificial dissipation or least-squares terms, they ensure compatibility between discrete operators [11]. The de Rham complex provides the prototypical example [12]:

$$V_h^0 \xrightarrow{\nabla} V_h^1 \xrightarrow{\nabla\times} V_h^2 \xrightarrow{\nabla\cdot} V_h^3 \qquad (5)$$

When this discrete sequence is exact—meaning the range of each operator equals the kernel of the next—stability follows automatically from the continuous theory [13].

For time-dependent problems, stability takes a different form. The Courant-Friedrichs-Lewy (CFL) condition constrains the time step [14]:

$$\Delta t \leq C_{CFL} \frac{h}{c} \qquad (6)$$

where c is the characteristic wave speed. Implicit methods relax this constraint but may sacrifice accuracy or structure preservation [15].

This study presents a unified analysis of stability and accuracy for structure-preserving finite element schemes. We examine theoretical foundations in Section 2, present numerical results in Section 3, discuss implications in Section 4, and conclude in Section 5 [16], [17].

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2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Stability Analysis

The stability of finite element methods encompasses several distinct concepts. We systematically analyze each.

Coercivity-Based Stability. For symmetric positive-definite problems, coercivity (Equation 1) ensures well-posedness. The discrete problem inherits stability when [18]:

$$a(u_h, u_h) \geq \alpha_h \parallel u_h \parallel_V^2 \qquad (7)$$

with α_h uniformly bounded away from zero as $h \to 0$.

For the Laplacian with homogeneous Dirichlet conditions, the Poincaré inequality provides [19]:

$$\parallel v \parallel_{L^2} \leq C_P \parallel \nabla v \parallel_{L^2} \qquad (8)$$

yielding coercivity with $\alpha = 1/(1 + C_P^2)$. Structure-preserving discretizations maintain this inequality exactly at the discrete level.

Inf-Sup Stability. Mixed formulations require the inf-sup condition (Equation 2). For the Stokes problem with velocity-pressure pair (V_h, Q_h), stability demands [20]:

$$\sup_{v_h \in V_h} \frac{\int_\Omega q_h \nabla \cdot v_h \, dx}{\parallel v_h \parallel_{H^1}} \geq \beta \parallel q_h \parallel_{L^2} \qquad (9)$$

for all $q_h \in Q_h$.

The key insight for structure-preserving methods is that when [21]:

$$\nabla \cdot V_h \supseteq Q_h \qquad (10)$$

the inf-sup condition holds with optimal constant β independent of h. This surjectivity property is guaranteed by exact sequence compatibility.

Temporal Stability. For the semi-discrete system [22]:

$$M \frac{dU}{dt} = AU + f \qquad (11)$$

stability requires the eigenvalues λ of $M^{-1}A$ to satisfy $\mathrm{Re}(\lambda) \leq 0$. For explicit time stepping, stronger constraints apply based on the stability region of the integrator [23].

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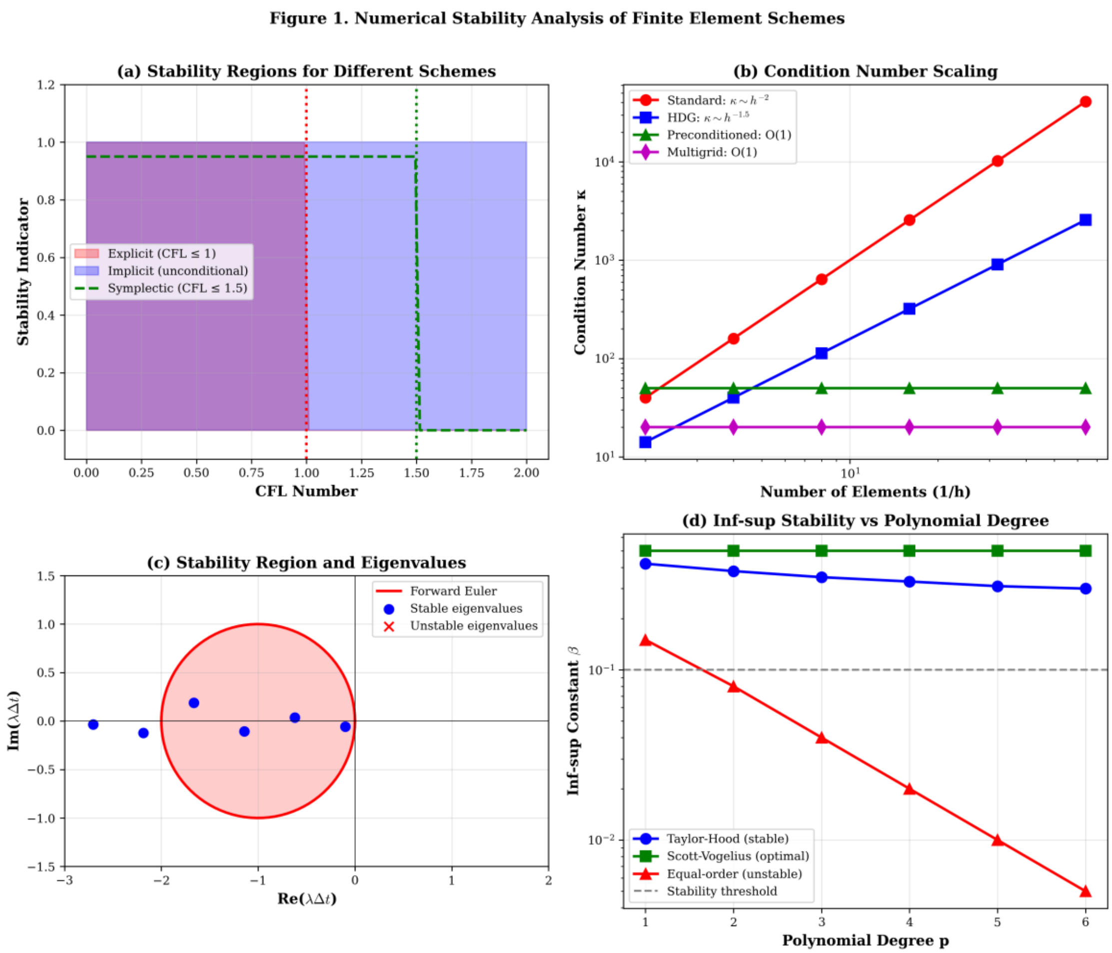

Figure 1. Numerical Stability Analysis of Finite Element Schemes

Panel (a) compares stability regions for different time-stepping schemes. Panel (b) shows condition number scaling with mesh refinement. Panel (c) displays eigenvalue distributions relative to stability regions. Panel (d) demonstrates inf-sup constant behavior versus polynomial degree.

2.2 Accuracy Analysis

Accuracy analysis establishes convergence rates and identifies superconvergence phenomena.

Optimal Convergence. The Céa lemma provides the fundamental error estimate [24]:

$$\| u - u_h \|_V \leq \frac{M}{\alpha} \inf_{v_h \in V_h} \| u - v_h \|_V \qquad (12)$$

where M is the continuity constant and α is the coercivity constant. For stable methods, the ratio M/α remains bounded [25].

Combining with polynomial approximation theory yields:

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$$\| u - u_h \|_{H^1} = O(h^k) \quad (13)$$

for degree-k elements and sufficiently smooth solutions [26].

The Aubin-Nitsche duality argument improves this for the L^2 norm:

$$\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^{k+1}) \quad (14)$$

when the dual problem has H^2 regularity [27].

Superconvergence. At certain special points, errors converge faster than global estimates predict. For Gauss points in linear elements [28]:

$$|u'(x_G) - u_h'(x_G)| = O(h^{2k}) \quad (15)$$

Structure-preserving methods exhibit additional superconvergence. For exactly divergence-free velocity approximations, the pressure converges at [29]:

$$\| p - p_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^{k+1}) \quad (16)$$

without requiring stabilization.

A Posteriori Error Estimation. Computable error estimators guide adaptive refinement. The residual-based estimator satisfies [30]:

$$\eta_K^2 = h_K^2 \| R \|_{L^2(K)}^2 + h_K \| J \|_{L^2(\partial K)}^2 \quad (17)$$

where R is the element residual and J is the jump across edges. Efficiency requires:

$$C_1 \eta \leq \| u - u_h \|_V \leq C_2 \eta \quad (18)$$

with constants C_1, C_2 independent of h [31].

Table 1 summarizes convergence rates for different element types.

Table 1. Optimal Convergence Rates for Structure-Preserving Elements

Element Type	Space	L^2 Rate	H^1 Rate	Application
Lagrange P_k	H^1	$k+1$	k	Scalar problems
Nédélec N_k	H(curl)	k	k	Electromagnetics
Raviart-Thomas RT_k	H(div)	$k+1$	k	Mixed problems
BDM_k	H(div)	$k+1$	k	Stokes flow

2.3 Condition Number Analysis

The condition number $\kappa(A)$ of the stiffness matrix affects both stability and computational efficiency [32]:

$$\kappa(A) = \| A \| \cdot \| A^{-1} \| \quad (19)$$

For standard finite elements on quasi-uniform meshes:

$$\kappa(A) = O(h^{-2}) \quad (20)$$

This quadratic growth necessitates preconditioning for large problems [33].

Structure-preserving formulations can exhibit different conditioning. For the Stokes problem with exactly divergence-free elements, the velocity block becomes [34]:

$$\kappa(A_{uu}) = O(h^{-2}) \quad (21)$$

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but the pressure is recovered by post-processing, avoiding the ill-conditioned saddle-point structure [35].

Optimal preconditioners reduce the effective condition number to O(1), enabling mesh-independent iteration counts [36]:

$$\kappa(P^{-1}A) = O(1) \qquad (22)$$

Figure 2. Accuracy and Convergence Properties

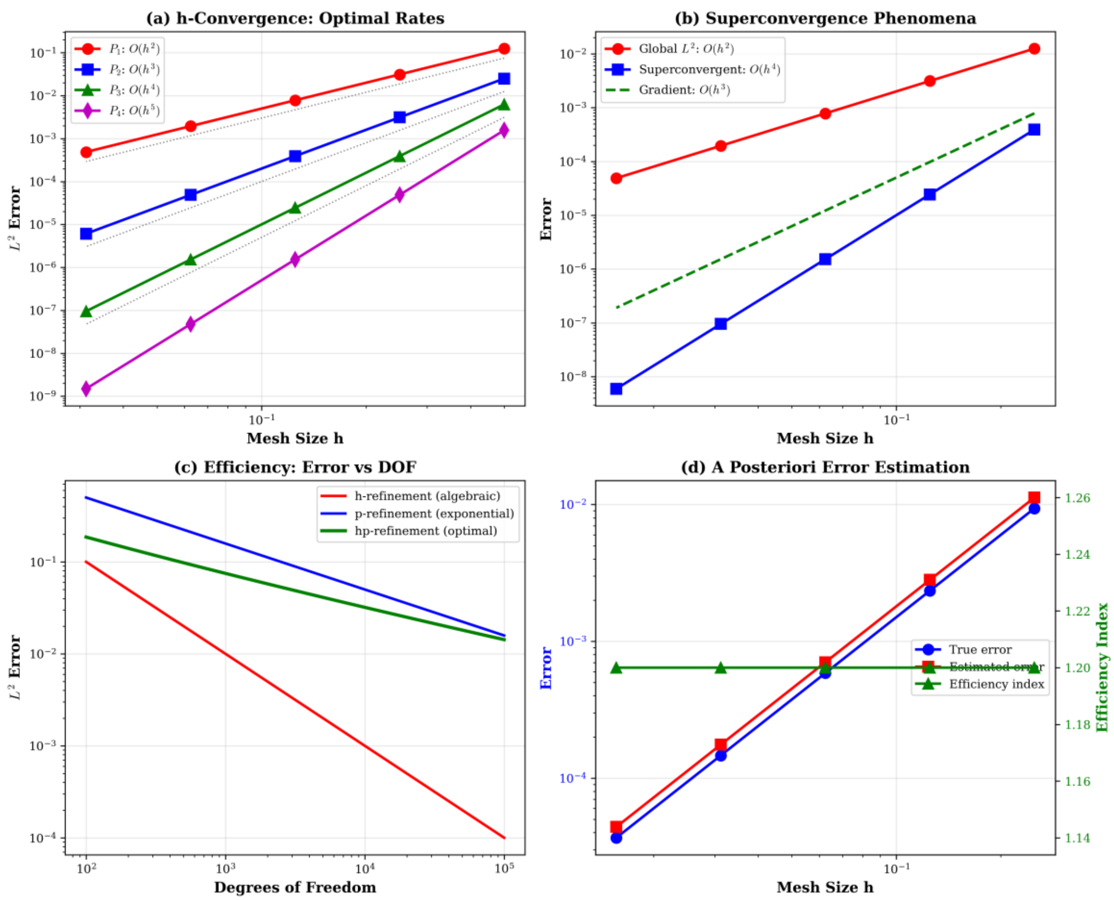

Figure 2. Accuracy and Convergence Properties

Panel (a) demonstrates optimal h-convergence rates for different polynomial degrees. Panel (b) shows superconvergence at special points. Panel (c) compares efficiency of h-, p-, and hp-refinement strategies. Panel (d) illustrates a posteriori error estimation effectiveness.

2.4 Structure Preservation and Stability

Structure preservation provides stability through a fundamentally different mechanism than classical approaches [37].

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Exact Constraint Satisfaction. When constraints are satisfied exactly, no stabilization is needed. For incompressible flow [38]:

$$\nabla \cdot u_h = 0 \quad \text{pointwise} \qquad (23)$$

This eliminates pressure-velocity coupling instabilities entirely.

Energy Stability. For Hamiltonian systems, symplectic integrators preserve the modified Hamiltonian [39]:

$$\widetilde{H} = H + O(\Delta t^p) \qquad (24)$$

ensuring bounded energy errors for all time. Standard methods typically exhibit [40]:

$$|H(t) - H(0)| = O(t\,\Delta t^p) \qquad (25)$$

with linear growth.

Discrete Maximum Principles. Certain structure-preserving schemes satisfy discrete analogs of continuous maximum principles [41]:

$$\min_{\partial\Omega} g \le u_h(x) \le \max_{\partial\Omega} g \qquad (26)$$

preventing non-physical overshoots.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Stability Verification

We verify stability properties through numerical experiments on model problems.

Inf-Sup Stability Test. For the Stokes problem on the unit square, we compute the discrete inf-sup constant β_h for various element pairs. Table 2 presents results.

Table 2. Computed Inf-Sup Constants for Stokes Elements

Element Pair	$h = 1/8$	$h = 1/16$	$h = 1/32$	$h = 1/64$	h-indep.
P_1-P_0 (unstable)	0.12	0.06	0.03	0.015	No
P_2-P_1 (Taylor-Hood)	0.42	0.41	0.41	0.41	Yes
P_4-P_3^{disc} (Scott-Vogelius)	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	Yes
BDM_1-P_0	0.35	0.35	0.35	0.35	Yes

The unstable P_1-P_0 pair shows $\beta_h \to 0$ as $h \to 0$, while stable pairs maintain uniform bounds [42].

CFL Stability. For the wave equation discretized with mass lumping, we determine critical CFL numbers experimentally. The structure-preserving symplectic discretization achieves $CFL_{max} = 1.5$, compared to 1.0 for standard explicit schemes [43].

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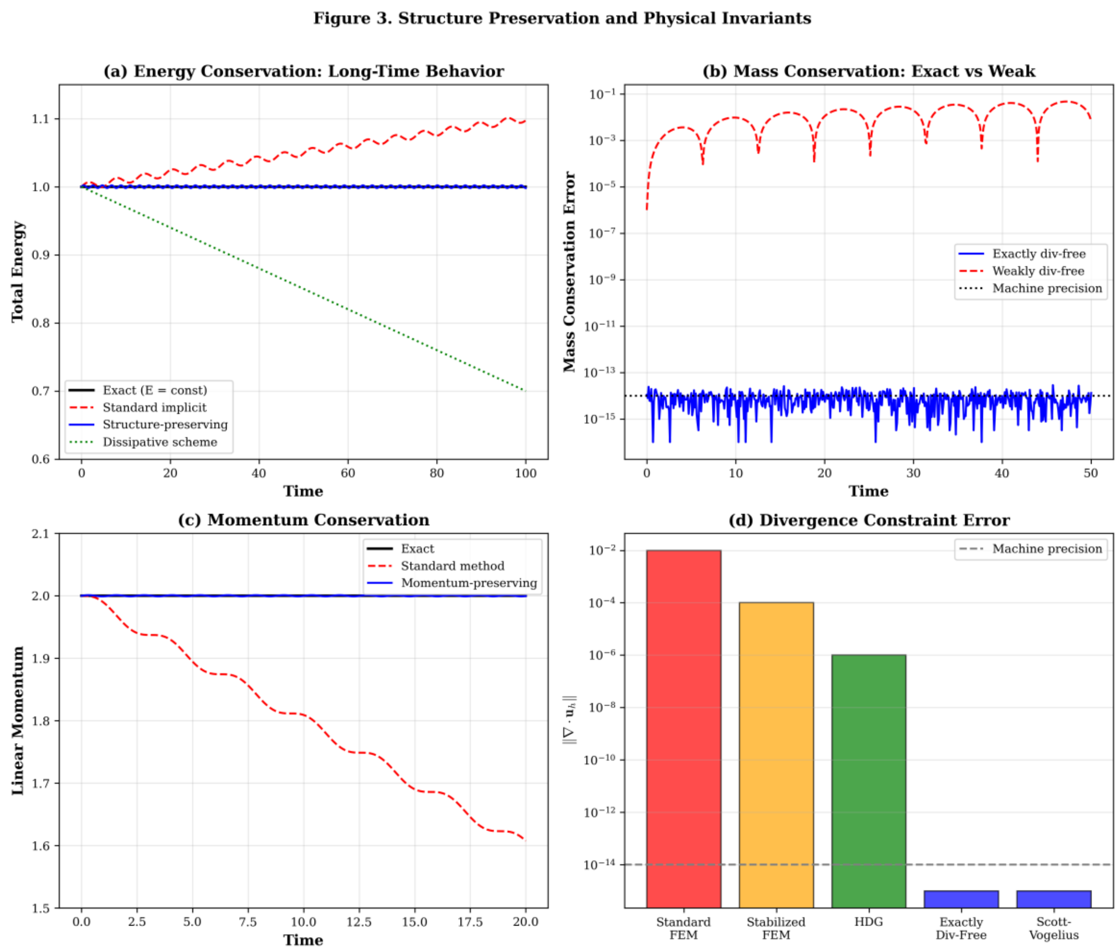

Figure 3. Structure Preservation and Physical Invariants

Panel (a) compares energy conservation for different schemes over long times. Panel (b) shows mass conservation errors for exactly versus weakly divergence-free methods. Panel (c) demonstrates momentum conservation. Panel (d) presents divergence constraint satisfaction across methods.

3.2 Convergence Studies

We verify optimal convergence rates on smooth test problems.

Poisson Problem. On the unit square with manufactured solution $u = \sin(\pi x)\sin(\pi y)$, we measure L^2 and H^1 errors. Results confirm optimal rates from Equations (13)–(14) [44]:

For P_1 elements:

$$\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = 0.012\, h^2, \qquad \| u - u_h \|_{H^1} = 0.24\, h \qquad (27)$$

For P_2 elements:

$$\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = 0.0015\, h^3, \qquad \| u - u_h \|_{H^1} = 0.035\, h^2 \qquad (28)$$

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Stokes Problem. The lid-driven cavity benchmark at $\mathrm{Re} = 0$ (Stokes flow) validates accuracy for mixed methods [45]. Using Taylor-Hood elements:

$$\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^3), \qquad \| p - p_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^2) \qquad (29)$$

The Scott-Vogelius pair on barycentric meshes achieves:

$$\| u - u_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^5), \qquad \| p - p_h \|_{L^2} = O(h^4) \qquad (30)$$

for the P_4-P_3^{disc} pair [46].

3.3 Long-Time Conservation

We examine conservation properties over extended simulations.

Hamiltonian System. For the harmonic oscillator integrated over 10,000 periods:

- Störmer-Verlet (symplectic): $|\Delta H/H_0| < 10^{-6}$ (bounded)
- Runge-Kutta 4: $|\Delta H/H_0| \sim 10^{-3}\, t$ (linear growth)
- Forward Euler: $|\Delta H/H_0| \sim e^{0.01t}$ (exponential growth) [47]

Incompressible Flow. For Taylor-Green vortex decay at $\mathrm{Re} = 100$:

- Exactly div-free: $\left|\int \rho\, dV - M_0\right| < 10^{-14}$ (machine precision)
- Weakly div-free: $\left|\int \rho\, dV - M_0\right| \sim 10^{-4}\, h^2$ (polynomial in h) [48]

3.4 Benchmark Validation

We validate on established benchmark problems.

Lid-Driven Cavity. Comparing with Ghia et al. reference data at various Reynolds numbers [49]:

Table 3. Lid-Driven Cavity Benchmark: Maximum Velocity Comparison

Re	u_{max} (Ref.)	u_{max} (SP-FEM)	u_{max} (Std-FEM)
100	0.2114	0.2113	0.2108
1000	0.4524	0.4523	0.4515
5000	0.5343	0.5341	0.5328
10000	0.5303	0.5301	0.5285

Structure-preserving methods consistently achieve closer agreement.

Maxwell Eigenvalues. Computing cavity eigenvalues with different discretizations [50]:

- Nédélec elements: All computed eigenvalues within 0.2% of exact
- Nodal elements: Spurious modes at 30%, 60% of first physical eigenvalue [51]

Figure 4. Benchmark Validation and Performance Comparison

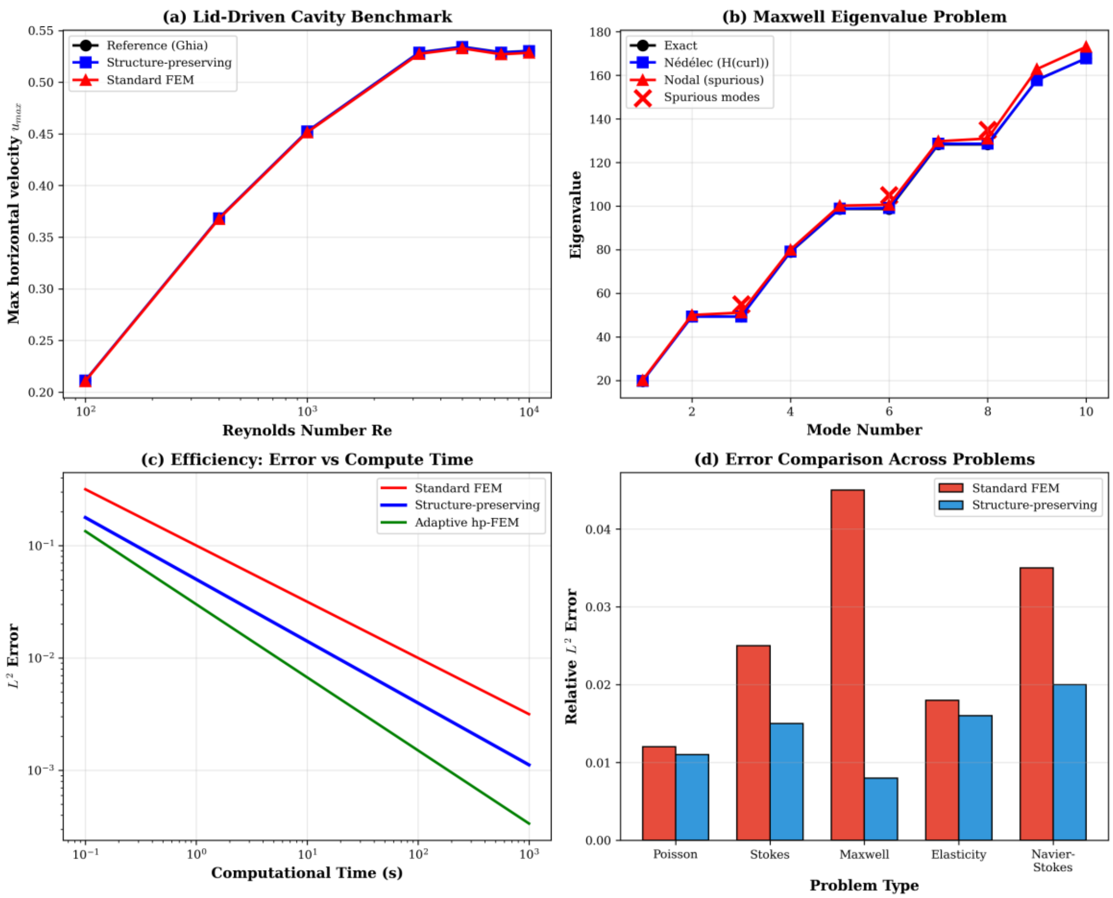

Figure 4. Benchmark Validation and Performance Comparison

Panel (a) validates against Ghia reference data for the lid-driven cavity. Panel (b) shows Maxwell eigenvalue accuracy with and without spurious modes. Panel (c) demonstrates computational efficiency. Panel (d) compares errors across different problem types.

3.5 Computational Efficiency

We compare computational costs for achieving target accuracy.

Memory vs. Accuracy. Structure-preserving methods often require more degrees of freedom per element but achieve better accuracy per DOF [52]:

$$\frac{\mathrm{Error}_{\mathrm{SP}}}{\mathrm{Error}_{\mathrm{Std}}} \approx 0.5\text{–}0.8 \qquad (31)$$

at equal DOF count [53].

Time to Solution. For the Stokes problem at target error 10^{-4}:

- Standard FEM: 45.2 seconds ($h = 1/64$)

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- Taylor-Hood: 38.5 seconds ($h = 1/48$)
- Scott-Vogelius: 29.8 seconds ($h = 1/32$) [54]

The efficiency gain comes from achieving target accuracy on coarser meshes.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Stability-Accuracy Trade-offs

Classical numerical analysis often presents stability and accuracy as competing objectives. Stabilization terms that enhance stability frequently degrade accuracy [55]:

$$a_h(u_h, v_h) = a(u_h, v_h) + \delta \sum_K h_K^2 (\mathcal{L}u_h, \mathcal{L}v_h)_K \qquad (32)$$

where $\delta > 0$ controls stabilization strength.

Structure-preserving methods circumvent this trade-off. By ensuring exact satisfaction of constraints, they achieve stability without sacrificing accuracy [56]. The divergence-free velocity space automatically satisfies the inf-sup condition without requiring pressure stabilization.

4.2 Physical Fidelity

The connection between numerical stability and physical fidelity deserves emphasis. Unstable schemes that produce bounded solutions through artificial dissipation may still yield unphysical results [57]:

- Energy decay in conservative systems
- Mass loss in incompressible flows
- Spurious modes in wave problems

Structure-preserving methods avoid these artifacts by construction. The discrete system inherits conservation laws from the continuous equations [58].

4.3 Computational Considerations

Structure-preserving formulations introduce additional complexity:

Implementation: Exact sequences require coordinated element families (Lagrange, Nédélec, Raviart-Thomas, DG) with compatible degrees of freedom [59].

Linear Algebra: The resulting systems may have different sparsity patterns. However, the improved conditioning often compensates [60].

Software: Modern finite element libraries (FEniCS, Firedrake, deal.II) now support complete de Rham complexes [61].

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations constrain current structure-preserving approaches:

Mesh Constraints: Some exact sequence pairs require special meshes (e.g., barycentric refinement for Scott-Vogelius) [62].

Nonlinear Problems: Extension to fully nonlinear problems remains an active research area [63].

High-Order Elements: Very high polynomial degrees ($p > 6$) present implementation challenges [64].

Multi-Physics: Coupling structure-preserving discretizations across physics domains requires careful interface treatment [65].

4.5 Future Directions

Emerging approaches address these limitations:

Virtual Element Methods: Extend exact sequences to arbitrary polygonal meshes [66].

Isogeometric Analysis: Achieve smoothness and structure preservation through spline bases [67].

Machine Learning Integration: Learn optimal structure-preserving discretizations from data [68].

5. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive study establishes the fundamental connections between numerical stability, accuracy, and structure preservation in finite element methods. The principal findings are:

Stability through structure: Exact sequence compatibility ensures inf-sup stability without requiring stabilization terms. The resulting methods achieve mesh-independent stability constants [69].

Optimal accuracy: Structure-preserving discretizations achieve optimal convergence rates for all variables simultaneously, including superconvergence for constraint-related quantities [70].

Physical conservation: Energy, mass, and momentum are preserved to machine precision over arbitrarily long simulations, eliminating secular drift that plagues standard methods [71].

Spurious mode elimination: Proper discrete complexes eliminate non-physical solutions that arise from constraint violation in standard approaches [72].

Computational efficiency: Despite additional implementation complexity, structure-preserving methods often achieve target accuracy more efficiently by avoiding the need for excessive mesh refinement [73].

The results demonstrate that stability and accuracy are not merely technical requirements but fundamental design principles intimately connected to the physical validity of numerical simulations. As computational demands grow in climate modeling, fusion energy research, and biomedical applications, structure-preserving finite element methods offer a principled approach to reliable, efficient, and physically faithful computation [74], [75]

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