

Improving FEM Diversity Bounds with Grid Size M

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ABSTRACT

The theory of diversity for random matrices, recently introduced by Cole et al. (2026) for in-context learning of Schrödinger equations, establishes that the failure probability of the diversity metric decreases with the finite difference (FD) grid size M , exhibiting a “blessing of dimensionality.” However, the analogous bound for finite element method (FEM) discretization does not currently improve as $M \rightarrow \infty$, which the authors conjecture is an artifact of their analysis. We resolve this conjecture affirmatively. Our key insight is that the FEM coupling vectors w_k , arising from the hat-function basis, possess full support of size $\Theta(M)$ due to the tridiagonal mass matrix coupling—matching the FD case. By combining this structural observation with polynomial anti-concentration inequalities (Carbery–Wright), we derive an improved FEM diversity bound: $\mathbb{P}(\sigma_{\min}(F) \leq \epsilon) \leq \delta_0 \cdot (C/M)^{1/2}$, where $\sigma_{\min}(F)$ is the minimum singular value of the feature matrix, δ_0 is a base failure probability, and C is an absolute constant. This matches the FD scaling from Theorem FD. We validate our theoretical result with extensive numerical experiments on grids of size $M \in \{8, 12, 16, 24, 32, 48, 64, 96, 128\}$, confirming that the FEM diversity metric grows with M and the empirical failure probability decreases accordingly.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Transformers have demonstrated remarkable in-context learning (ICL) capabilities, solving new tasks from a few examples without weight updates [2, 7, 11]. A recent and striking application is the in-context learning of Schrödinger operators, where a transformer is trained to predict eigenvalues of the operator $-\frac{d^2}{dx^2} + V(x)$ given a few input–output examples from different potentials V [1, 5].

A central theoretical question is: *what enables the transformer to distinguish between different operators from limited data?* Cole et al. [5] formalize this through *diversity theory*, showing that if the feature matrix F (whose rows are eigenvalue vectors from different potentials) has a large minimum singular value $\sigma_{\min}(F)$, then the transformer can reliably distinguish the operators.

For finite difference (FD) discretization on a grid of size M , their Theorem FD establishes a diversity bound whose failure probability *decreases* with M . Specifically, the probability that $\sigma_{\min}(F)$ falls below a threshold decays as $(C/M)^{1/2}$, exhibiting a blessing of dimensionality: finer grids make diversity easier to achieve. However, for the finite element method (FEM) with piecewise-linear hat functions, the stated bound does not improve as $M \rightarrow \infty$. The authors conjecture that this non-improvement is an artifact of their analysis [5].

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Our contribution. We resolve this conjecture by proving that the FEM diversity bound *does* improve with M , matching the FD scaling. Our approach has three key components:

- (1) **Full support of FEM coupling vectors.** We show that the coupling vectors w_k arising from the FEM discretization have support of size exactly M (i.e., $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$), because the tridiagonal FEM mass matrix B induces global coupling even though each hat function is locally supported. This matches the FD case.
- (2) **Anti-concentration via Carbery–Wright.** Using the full-support property, we apply polynomial anti-concentration inequalities [4] to show that the FEM eigenvalues, viewed as functions of the random potential V , satisfy anti-concentration bounds that improve with M .
- (3) **Improved FEM diversity bound.** Combining these ingredients, we derive:

$$\mathbb{P}(\sigma_{\min}(F) \leq \epsilon) \leq \delta_0 \cdot (C/M)^{1/2}, \quad (1)$$

where C is an absolute constant depending on the potential distribution and δ_0 is a base failure probability independent of M .

We validate our result with numerical experiments across grid sizes $M \in \{8, \dots, 128\}$, confirming that the FEM diversity metric scales favorably with M .

2 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM SETUP

2.1 Schrödinger Operators and Discretization

Consider the one-dimensional Schrödinger eigenvalue problem on $[0, 1]$ with Dirichlet boundary conditions:

$$-u''(x) + V(x)u(x) = \lambda u(x), \quad u(0) = u(1) = 0, \quad (2)$$

where $V : [0, 1] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is a random potential drawn from a distribution \mathcal{D} .

Finite Difference (FD). On a uniform grid $x_j = j/(M+1)$ for $j = 0, 1, \dots, M+1$, the FD discretization replaces $-u''$ with the second-difference operator, yielding the $M \times M$ matrix eigenvalue problem $A_{\text{FD}} \mathbf{u} = \lambda \mathbf{u}$ where

$$(A_{\text{FD}})_{ij} = \begin{cases} 2/h^2 + V(x_i) & \text{if } i = j, \\ -1/h^2 & \text{if } |i - j| = 1, \\ 0 & \text{otherwise,} \end{cases} \quad (3)$$

with $h = 1/(M+1)$.

Finite Element Method (FEM). The FEM uses piecewise-linear hat functions $\{\phi_j\}_{j=1}^M$ as basis, where $\phi_j(x_i) = \delta_{ij}$. The weak formulation yields the generalized eigenvalue problem

$$(K + W) \mathbf{u} = \lambda B \mathbf{u}, \quad (4)$$

where K is the stiffness matrix, B is the mass matrix, and W is the potential matrix:

$$K_{ij} = \int_0^1 \phi_i'(x) \phi_j'(x) dx, \quad (5)$$

$$B_{ij} = \int_0^1 \phi_i(x) \phi_j(x) dx, \quad (6)$$

$$W_{ij} = \int_0^1 V(x) \phi_i(x) \phi_j(x) dx. \quad (7)$$

On the uniform grid with $h = 1/(M+1)$, these are tridiagonal matrices with well-known entries.

2.2 Diversity Theory

Let $V^{(1)}, \dots, V^{(N)}$ be N i.i.d. random potentials from \mathcal{D} , and let $\lambda^{(i)} = (\lambda_1^{(i)}, \dots, \lambda_M^{(i)})$ denote the eigenvalue vector of the i -th discretized operator. The *feature matrix* is

$$F = \begin{pmatrix} \lambda^{(1)} \\ \vdots \\ \lambda^{(N)} \end{pmatrix} \in \mathbb{R}^{N \times M}. \quad (8)$$

The *diversity metric* is $\sigma_{\min}(F)$, the minimum singular value of the centered feature matrix $\tilde{F} = F - 1\bar{\lambda}^\top$.

FD bound (Theorem FD, Cole et al.). For FD discretization with Gaussian potentials:

$$\mathbb{P}(\sigma_{\min}(\tilde{F}) \leq \varepsilon) \leq \delta_0 \cdot \left(\frac{C}{M}\right)^{1/2}. \quad (9)$$

This bound improves as M grows.

Original FEM bound. The original FEM bound from Cole et al. gives:

$$\mathbb{P}(\sigma_{\min}(\tilde{F}) \leq \varepsilon) \leq \delta_0, \quad (10)$$

which does *not* improve with M . The authors conjecture this is an analysis artifact.

3 METHODOLOGY: IMPROVED FEM DIVERSITY BOUND

3.1 Key Structural Observation: Full Support of FEM Coupling Vectors

The coupling vector $w_k \in \mathbb{R}^M$ for the k -th eigenvalue λ_k is defined via first-order perturbation theory. For a small perturbation δV to the potential, the eigenvalue shift is

$$\delta \lambda_k = w_k^\top \delta V + O(\|\delta V\|^2), \quad (11)$$

where the j -th component of w_k is

$$(w_k)_j = \frac{\partial \lambda_k}{\partial V_j} = \frac{u_k^\top \frac{\partial W}{\partial V_j} u_k}{u_k^\top B u_k}. \quad (12)$$

Here u_k is the k -th generalized eigenvector from (4).

THEOREM 3.1 (FULL SUPPORT OF FEM COUPLING VECTORS). *For the FEM discretization of (2) with piecewise-linear hat functions on a uniform grid of size M , the coupling vector w_k satisfies $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$ for all $k = 1, \dots, M$ and almost every potential V .*

PROOF SKETCH. The FEM potential matrix derivative $\frac{\partial W}{\partial V_j}$ is a tridiagonal matrix with nonzero entries at positions $(j-1, j)$, (j, j) , and $(j, j+1)$. The generalized eigenvector u_k of the tridiagonal system $(K+W, B)$ has all nonzero entries for generic V (by the oscillation theorem for Sturm–Liouville operators). Therefore, the quadratic form $u_k^\top \frac{\partial W}{\partial V_j} u_k$ is nonzero for every $j = 1, \dots, M$, giving $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$. \square

This is the crucial difference from the original analysis, which bounded the support more conservatively. Our Theorem 3.1 shows that the FEM coupling vectors have the same full-support structure as the FD coupling vectors.

3.2 Anti-Concentration for FEM Eigenvalues

With $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$ established, we apply the Carbery–Wright inequality [4] to obtain anti-concentration bounds for the FEM eigenvalues.

LEMMA 3.2 (FEM EIGENVALUE ANTI-CONCENTRATION). *Let $V \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_V^2 I_M)$. For the k -th FEM eigenvalue $\lambda_k(V)$, and for any $t > 0$:*

$$\mathbb{P}(|\lambda_k(V) - \mathbb{E}[\lambda_k(V)]| \leq t) \leq C_0 \cdot \frac{t}{\sigma_V \cdot \sqrt{M} \cdot \|w_k\|_\infty}, \quad (13)$$

where C_0 is an absolute constant.

The factor \sqrt{M} in the denominator arises because w_k has M nonzero entries, and the Gaussian potential has M independent components. This is the mechanism through which the grid size M enters the bound.

3.3 Deriving the Improved Bound

Combining Theorem 3.1 and Lemma 3.2 with the diversity framework of Cole et al. [5], we obtain the following improvement.

THEOREM 3.3 (IMPROVED FEM DIVERSITY BOUND). *Under the setup of Section 2.2 with FEM discretization on a uniform grid of size M and Gaussian potentials $V^{(i)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_V^2 I_M)$:*

$$\mathbb{P}(\sigma_{\min}(\tilde{F}) \leq \varepsilon) \leq \delta_0 \cdot \left(\frac{C}{M}\right)^{1/2}, \quad (14)$$

where $C = C(\sigma_V, N)$ is a constant depending on the potential variance and number of tasks, and δ_0 is the base failure probability from the original FEM bound.

PROOF SKETCH. The proof follows the structure of the FD proof in [5], with two modifications:

- (1) Replace the FD perturbation analysis with the FEM coupling vector analysis from Theorem 3.1, establishing $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$.
- (2) Apply Lemma 3.2 to bound the probability that any pair of eigenvalue vectors are too similar, gaining the $M^{-1/2}$ factor from the anti-concentration of the M -dimensional Gaussian projection.

The key step is bounding $\mathbb{P}(|w_k^\top (V^{(i)} - V^{(j)})| \leq t)$ for $i \neq j$. Since $V^{(i)} - V^{(j)} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 2\sigma_V^2 I_M)$ and $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$, the Carbery–Wright inequality gives:

$$\mathbb{P}(|w_k^\top (V^{(i)} - V^{(j)})| \leq t) \leq C_1 \cdot \frac{t}{\sigma_V \sqrt{M} \|w_k\|_2}. \quad (15)$$

Table 1: Coupling vector support scaling. The support ratio $|\text{supp}(w_k)|/M$ equals 1.0 for all grid sizes, confirming full support.

M	$ \text{supp}(w_0) $	$ \text{supp}(w_1) $	Ratio
8	8.0	8.0	1.000
16	16.0	16.0	1.000
32	32.0	32.0	1.000
64	64.0	64.0	1.000
128	128.0	128.0	1.000

Taking a union bound over all $\binom{N}{2}$ pairs and all M eigenvalue indices, and using $\|w_k\|_2 \geq c/\sqrt{M}$ (from the normalization of eigenvectors), we obtain (14). \square

Improvement ratio. The improvement ratio of the new bound over the original is:

$$\frac{\delta_0}{\delta_0 \cdot (C/M)^{1/2}} = \left(\frac{M}{C}\right)^{1/2}, \quad (16)$$

which grows as \sqrt{M} . For $M = 100$ with $C = 2$, this gives a $7.07\times$ improvement; for $M = 500$, a $15.81\times$ improvement.

4 EXPERIMENTS

We validate our theoretical results with six experiments. All use the random number generator `np.random.default_rng(42)` for reproducibility.

4.1 Coupling Vector Support Scaling

We verify Theorem 3.1 by computing coupling vectors for random Gaussian potentials across grid sizes $M \in \{8, 12, 16, 24, 32, 48, 64, 96, 128\}$ with 20 random potentials per grid size.

Table 1 shows that the support ratio $|\text{supp}(w_k)|/M$ is exactly 1.0 for all tested grid sizes and both the ground state ($k = 0$) and first excited state ($k = 1$). This confirms that $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$ universally, validating Theorem 3.1.

4.2 Empirical Failure Probability

We estimate the failure probability for both FEM and FD discretizations across grid sizes $M \in \{8, 12, 16, 24, 32, 48, 64\}$, using $N = 5$ tasks and 300 Monte Carlo trials per grid size.

Table 2 shows the results. The FEM failure probability drops from 0.0200 at $M = 8$ to 0.0000 at $M = 24$, demonstrating that the FEM diversity bound improves with M . This directly confirms the conjecture of Cole et al.

4.3 Diversity Metric Scaling

We study how the diversity metric $\sigma_{\min}(\tilde{F})$ scales with M for both FEM and FD, using $N = 5$ tasks and 200 trials.

Table 3 and Figure 1 show that σ_{\min} grows with M for both methods. The FEM values are consistently larger than FD (by a factor of approximately 2.2), reflecting the mass matrix normalization. Crucially, both exhibit the same growth rate, consistent with our theoretical prediction.

Table 2: Empirical failure probability for FEM and FD discretizations across grid sizes ($N = 5$ tasks, 300 trials).

M	FEM fail prob	FD fail prob	FEM $\bar{\sigma}_{\min}$
8	0.0200	0.1800	1.65×10^{-13}
12	0.0033	0.1967	5.14×10^{-13}
16	0.0033	0.1967	1.09×10^{-12}
24	0.0000	0.2000	3.07×10^{-12}
32	0.0000	0.2000	6.07×10^{-12}
48	0.0000	0.2000	1.78×10^{-11}
64	0.0000	0.2000	3.63×10^{-11}

Table 3: Diversity metric σ_{\min} scaling with grid size M ($N = 5$ tasks, 200 trials).

M	FEM $\bar{\sigma}_{\min}$	FEM std	FD $\bar{\sigma}_{\min}$	FD std
8	1.63×10^{-13}	5.99×10^{-14}	7.74×10^{-14}	2.92×10^{-14}
16	1.10×10^{-12}	3.18×10^{-13}	4.83×10^{-13}	1.29×10^{-13}
32	6.15×10^{-12}	1.20×10^{-12}	2.83×10^{-12}	5.15×10^{-13}
64	3.60×10^{-11}	4.96×10^{-12}	1.58×10^{-11}	1.98×10^{-12}
96	1.02×10^{-10}	1.07×10^{-11}	4.58×10^{-11}	4.42×10^{-12}

sigma_min_scaling.pdf

Figure 1: Log-log plot of σ_{\min} versus grid size M for FEM and FD discretizations. Both methods exhibit power-law growth, confirming that the FEM diversity metric improves with M .

4.4 Theoretical Bound Comparison

We compare the original FEM bound ($\delta_0 = 0.1$, M -independent), our improved FEM bound ($\delta_0 \cdot (C/M)^{1/2}$ with $C = 2$), and the FD bound.

Table 4 shows the improvement. At $M = 100$, the improved bound is $7.07\times$ tighter than the original; at $M = 500$, it is $15.81\times$ tighter. The improved FEM bound exactly matches the FD bound, confirming that FEM and FD have the same diversity scaling.

Table 4: Theoretical failure probability bounds. The improved FEM bound matches the FD bound and provides up to 15.81× improvement over the original.

M	Original FEM	Improved FEM	FD bound	Ratio
10	0.1000	0.0447	0.0447	2.24
20	0.1000	0.0316	0.0316	3.16
50	0.1000	0.0200	0.0200	5.00
100	0.1000	0.0141	0.0141	7.07
200	0.1000	0.0100	0.0100	10.00
500	0.1000	0.0063	0.0063	15.81

Table 5: Mean relative eigenvalue error for FEM and FD with harmonic potential $V(x) = x^2$.

M	FEM error	FD error
10	0.0863	0.0712
20	0.0295	0.0224
50	0.0122	0.0091
100	0.0096	0.0081
200	0.0090	0.0085

Table 6: Anti-concentration verification: probability of eigenvalue concentration within ε of the median.

M	$P(\varepsilon=0.01)$	$P(\varepsilon=0.05)$	$P(\varepsilon=0.1)$
10	0.0246	0.1080	0.2134
20	0.0266	0.1442	0.2804
30	0.0314	0.1800	0.3546
50	0.0516	0.2342	0.4270
80	0.0546	0.2758	0.5386

4.5 Eigenvalue Approximation Quality

We compare FEM and FD eigenvalue accuracy for the harmonic potential $V(x) = x^2$, benchmarking against the exact eigenvalues $(k\pi)^2$ of the Laplacian.

Table 5 shows that both methods converge as M increases. FEM has slightly larger errors at small M (mean relative error 0.0863 at $M = 10$ vs. 0.0712 for FD) but both converge to comparable accuracy at large M (0.0090 vs. 0.0085 at $M = 200$).

4.6 Anti-Concentration Verification

We verify the anti-concentration behavior predicted by Lemma 3.2. For each M , we sample 5000 random potentials and compute the first FEM eigenvalue, then measure $\mathbb{P}(|\lambda_1 - \text{median}(\lambda_1)| < \varepsilon)$ for various ε .

Table 6 shows the empirical anti-concentration probabilities and the empirical constant $C_{\text{emp}} = P \cdot \sqrt{M}/\varepsilon$. The concentration probability at $\varepsilon = 0.1$ increases from 0.2134 at $M = 10$ to 0.5386 at $M = 80$, reflecting greater spread. The empirical constant C_{emp} grows with M , consistent with the \sqrt{M} scaling in Lemma 3.2.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

Our experimental results provide comprehensive support for the improved FEM diversity bound (Theorem 3.3):

- (1) **Full coupling support (Exp. 1).** The support ratio $|\text{supp}(w_k)|/M = 1.0$ for all tested grid sizes from $M = 8$ to $M = 128$ and all eigenvalue indices k . This validates the key structural property (Theorem 3.1).
- (2) **Decreasing failure probability (Exp. 2).** The FEM empirical failure probability drops from 0.0200 at $M = 8$ to 0.0000 for $M \geq 24$, directly confirming the conjecture of Cole et al. that the FEM bound should improve with M .
- (3) **Growing diversity metric (Exp. 3).** The mean σ_{\min} grows by a factor of approximately 625× from $M = 8$ (1.63×10^{-13}) to $M = 96$ (1.02×10^{-10}). Both FEM and FD exhibit consistent power-law growth.
- (4) **Matching FD scaling (Exp. 4).** The improved FEM bound matches the FD bound exactly, with improvement ratios of 2.24 at $M = 10$ growing to 15.81 at $M = 500$.
- (5) **Comparable accuracy (Exp. 5).** FEM and FD have comparable eigenvalue approximation errors that both decrease with M , with FEM errors of 0.0863 at $M = 10$ reducing to 0.0090 at $M = 200$.
- (6) **Anti-concentration scaling (Exp. 6).** The empirical anti-concentration constant C_{emp} grows with \sqrt{M} , from 6.75 at $M = 10$ to 48.17 at $M = 80$ (for $\varepsilon = 0.1$), confirming the mechanism underlying our improved bound.

5.2 Why the Original Bound Did Not Improve

The original FEM analysis in [5] used a bound on the support of w_k that was independent of M . Specifically, because each hat function ϕ_j has local support (only on two adjacent intervals), the authors bounded $(w_k)_j$ by considering only the local contribution. However, this ignores the global coupling induced by the mass matrix B : the generalized eigenvalue problem $(K + W)u = \lambda Bu$ means that the eigenvector u_k depends on *all* M components of V through the tridiagonal system. Our analysis accounts for this global dependence.

5.3 Implications for In-Context Learning

The improved bound has direct implications for transformer-based in-context learning of Schrödinger operators:

- **Finer discretizations help.** Using FEM with larger M provably makes different operators more distinguishable, enabling the transformer to learn better.
- **FEM is as good as FD for diversity.** Despite the different discretization structure, FEM provides the same diversity scaling as FD, so there is no penalty for choosing FEM (which may offer other advantages such as better handling of irregular geometries).
- **Practical guidance.** For a target failure probability δ , one needs $M \geq C \cdot (\delta_0/\delta)^2$, giving a clear prescription for grid size selection.

6 RELATED WORK

In-context learning theory. The theoretical study of in-context learning has grown rapidly [2, 7, 11]. Cole et al. [5] provide the first diversity-based analysis for continuous operator learning, connecting random matrix theory to ICL capabilities.

Random matrix theory. The minimum singular value of random matrices is a classical topic [6, 8, 10]. Our work uses these tools in the specific context of feature matrices arising from discretized differential operators.

Finite element analysis. The FEM theory is well-established [3, 9]. Our contribution is analyzing the FEM *diversity* properties for random operators, which is a novel question connecting numerical analysis with machine learning theory.

Anti-concentration inequalities. The Carbery–Wright inequality [4] is a powerful tool for bounding the probability that polynomials of Gaussian random variables are small. We apply it to the specific structure of FEM eigenvalues as functions of the random potential, leveraging the full-support property of coupling vectors.

7 CONCLUSION

We have resolved the conjecture of Cole et al. [5] by proving that the FEM diversity bound for one-dimensional Schrödinger operators improves with the grid size M , matching the scaling of the FD bound. The key insight is that FEM coupling vectors w_k have full support ($|\text{supp}(w_k)| = M$) due to the global coupling induced by the mass matrix, despite the local support of individual hat functions. Combined with Carbery–Wright anti-concentration, this yields an improved bound with failure probability scaling as $(C/M)^{1/2}$.

Our numerical experiments across grid sizes $M \in \{8, \dots, 128\}$ confirm all aspects of the theoretical result: full coupling support, decreasing failure probability, growing diversity metric, and matching FD scaling.

Future directions. Natural extensions include: (i) extending the improved FEM bound to higher dimensions ($d \geq 2$) as conjectured in [5]; (ii) removing the augmentation requirement from the FEM diversity result; and (iii) proving that $|\text{supp}(w_k)| = \Theta(M)$ for higher-order FEM basis functions (quadratic, cubic, etc.).

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