Laboratory Observations of Slow Earthquakes – Insights on the mechanics of slow stick-slip

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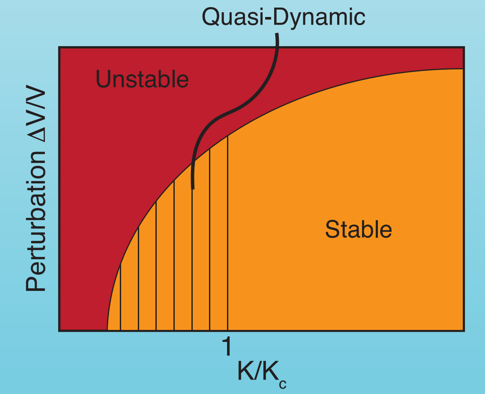
Introduction

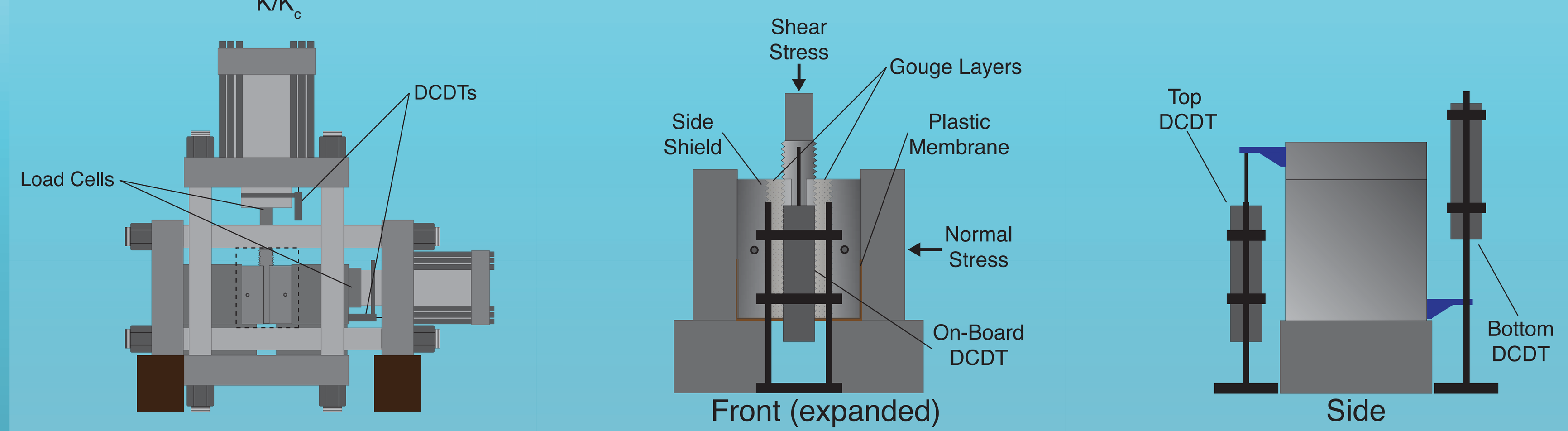
The classical view that faults fail in seismic or a-seismic fashion has been incomplete since observations of tremor and slow-earthquakes in a wide range of geologic settings almost a decade ago. Faults fail in a spectrum of slip behavior as demonstrated by slow slip events, slow and low-frequency earthquakes, episodic tremor and slip, and non-volcanic tremor. The underlying causes of this spectrum of behavior and the processes that control the failure mode of a particular fault are poorly understood, and constitute one of the most pressing conundrums of the field. Field observations provide documentation of slow-slip events at many different locations, but provide little insight into their mechanism. Laboratory observations provide idealized physical models of fault zones, but have historically been unable to reproduce slow-slip events in a systematic and controllable way. We have demonstrated the full range of the seismic slip spectrum in the laboratory and present that data in the context of natural observations.

Outstanding Questions

- Is stiffness the main control on fault failure mode?
- Is the critical stiffness a function of velocity?
- What can we learn about the scaling relations of slow and fast earthquakes?

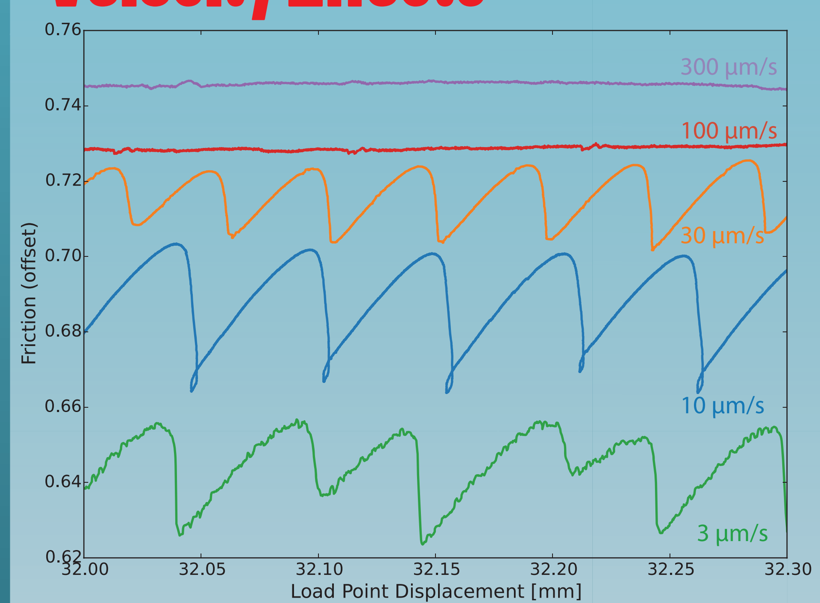


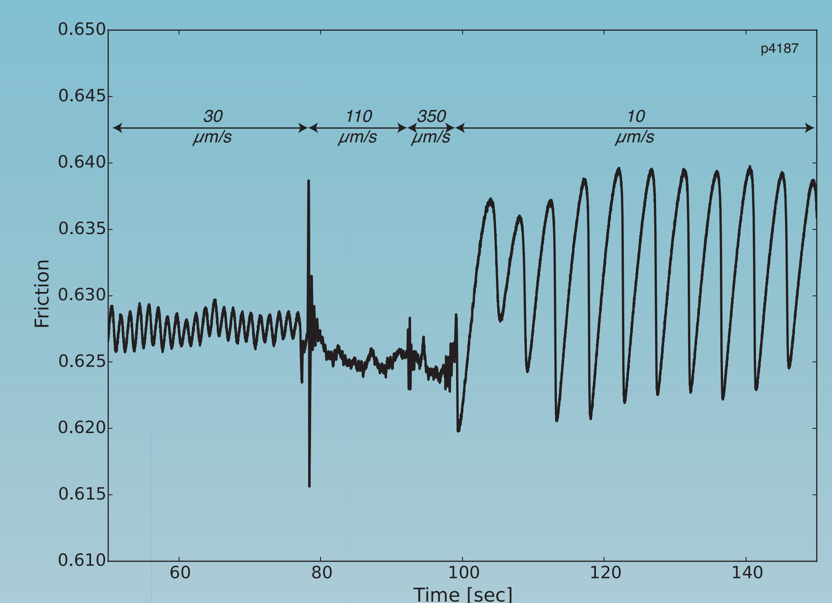
Single state variable rate-and-state frictional theory suggests that when k'< kc' the system behaves in an unstable fashion with the velocity of the slider going to infinity (neglecting inertia). When k'> kc', the system is intrinsically stable to velocity and stress perturbations and slides in a stable manner. For the special case of k'= kc' we can produce emergent slow-slip behavior that was previously thought to be explained only by two state variable systems or a more complicated set of governing equations.



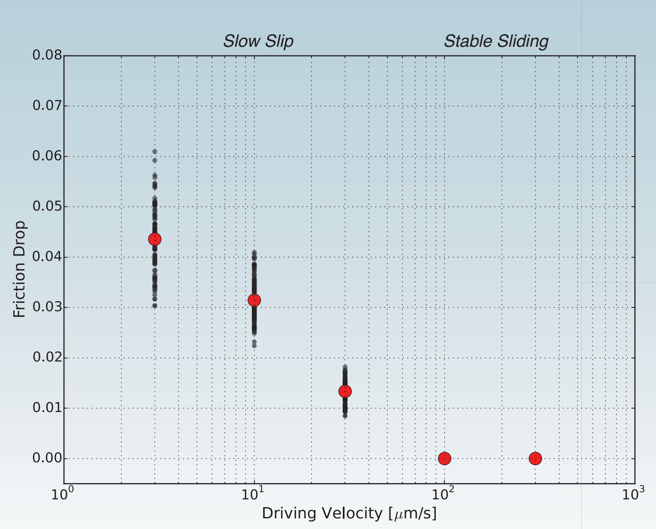
Samples were prepared using steel or titanium side blocks and steel or acrylic (PMMA) central shearing blocks. We used Min-U-Sil 40 powdered silica (U.S. Silica Co.) to simulate granular fault gouge. Samples were constructed as 3-mm thick layers, and with 10 cm x 10 cm frictional contact area. Layers were prepared and sheared under 100% relative humidity at room temperature.

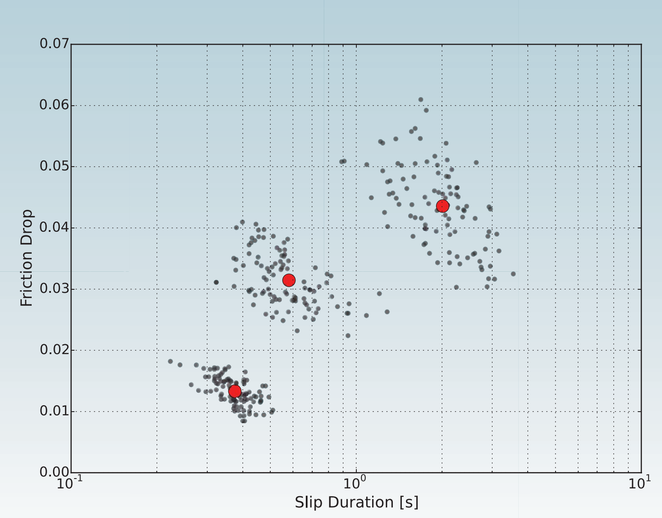
Velocity Effects





Experiments at a constant normal stress were run at different velocities for their duration (left) resulting in a transition to stable behavior at high driving velocities. In a similar experiment (right) we performed step changes to the velocity that turn on and off the slow-slip behavior. This indicates that either the system stiffness (k) or critical stiffness (k_c) is a function of velocity.

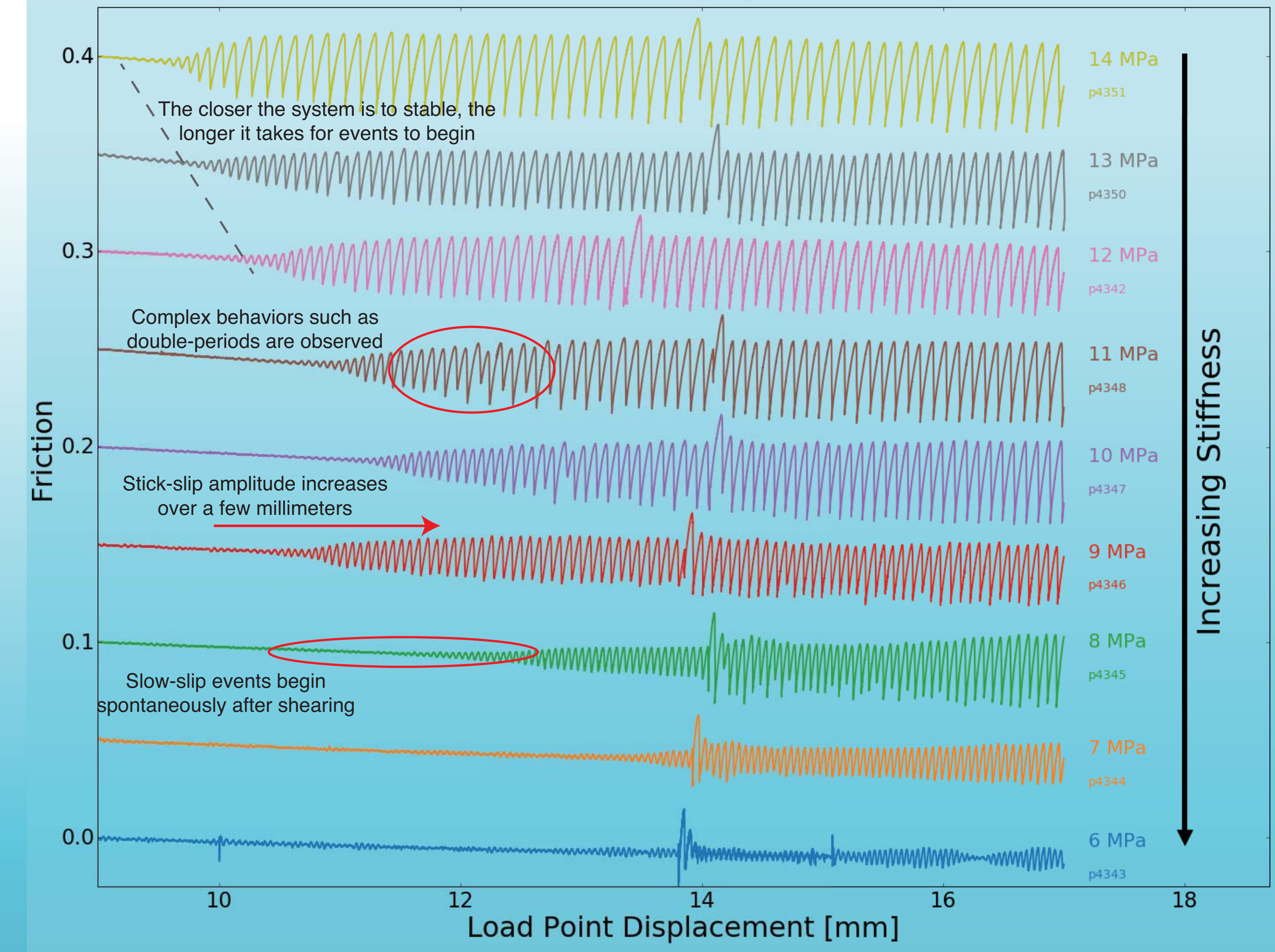




Friction drop and slip duration both show a systematic pattern with the driving velocity as has been observed for other laboratory stick-slip event catalogs. Data spread increases for lower slip rates and increasingly double period and complex behavior was observer. Non-linearity in slip-duration may be a function of how slip-duration is defined.

Stiffness Effects

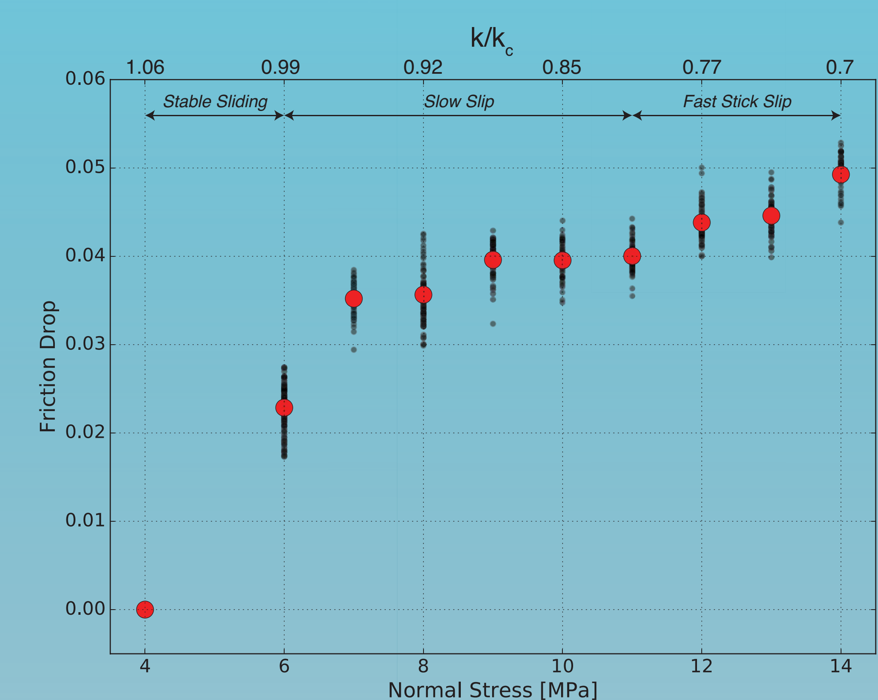
To investigate the effects of changing the system stiffness on the slip events and their properties, we ran a suite of experiments in which the shearing velocity was a constant 10 μm/s for the duration of the experiment. Assuming that the material properties are not largely effected by changes in normal stress or material comminution, the critical stiffness should remain approximately the same, making this a simple way to view the effects of stiffness.

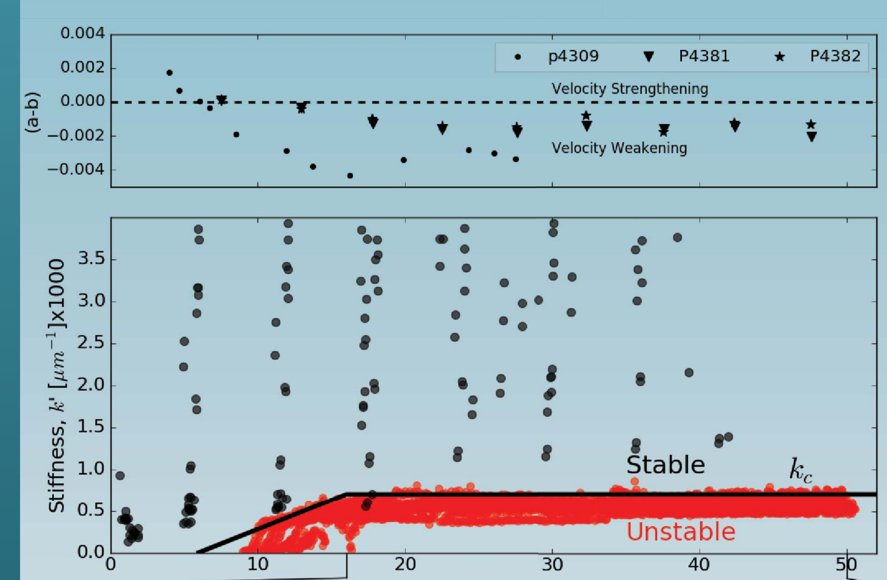


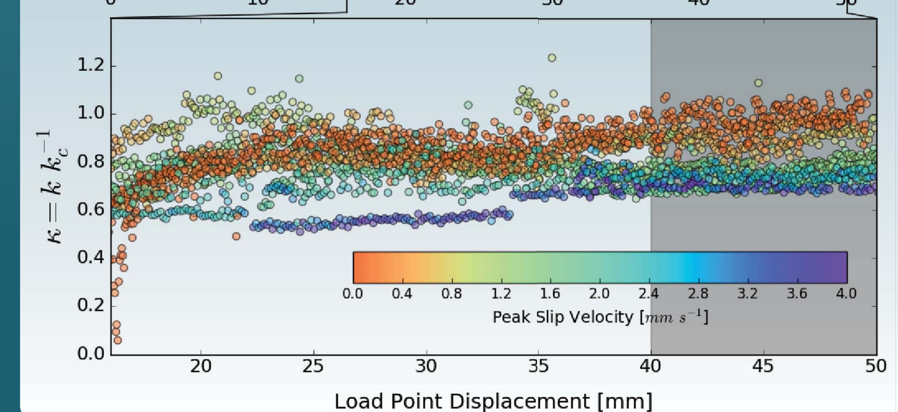
Experiments run at different normal stresses have different effective stiffnesses. Spikes are 13-14mm are holds while sensors were offset. We observe:

- All slip events are emergent from stable sliding.
- Stick slip events have shorter durations at low stiffnesses.
- Fast stick slip events produce larger stress drops.
- The transition from slow to fast produces interesting behaviors such as period doubling and amplitude modulation.
- Strain (i.e. fabric development) is an important factor in emergent slow/stick-slip behavior.

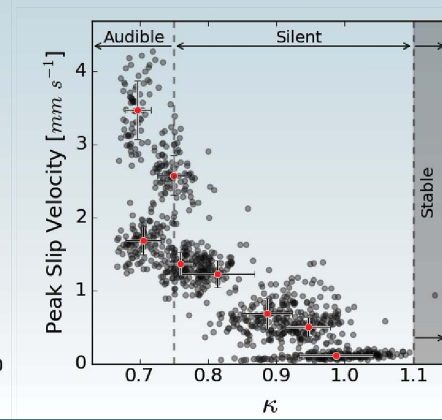
- Friction drop is a roughly linear function of the normal stress (stiffness) over the 9 experiments run with a constant driving velocity.
- Events displayed are the last 100 from each experiment.
- The kink may represent transition to a system with enhanced creep or to a system in which inertia is completely negligible.
- Expect there to be a lower limit on the critical stiffness ratio once the system is fully dynamic and inertial.

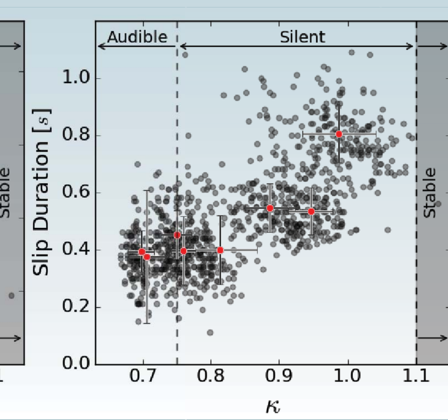






- The stability boundary (black line) predicted by theory well separates experimental data into stable and unstable regions.
- During an experiment, the system stiffens, drawing closer to the stability threshold.
- Peak slip velocity is a nearly linear function of the critical stiffness ratio: the closer to stability the system is, the slower the system fails.
- Slip duration is also a nearly linear function of the critical stiffness ratio: the closer to stability the system is, the longer the slip duration is.

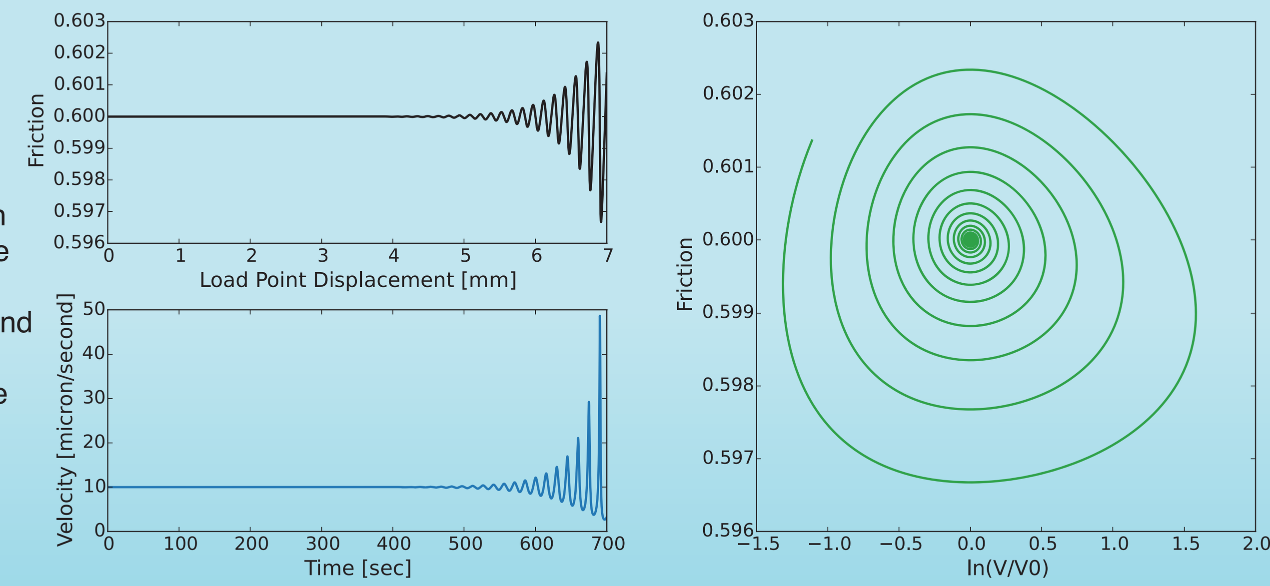




Slider Velocity - Model & Experiment

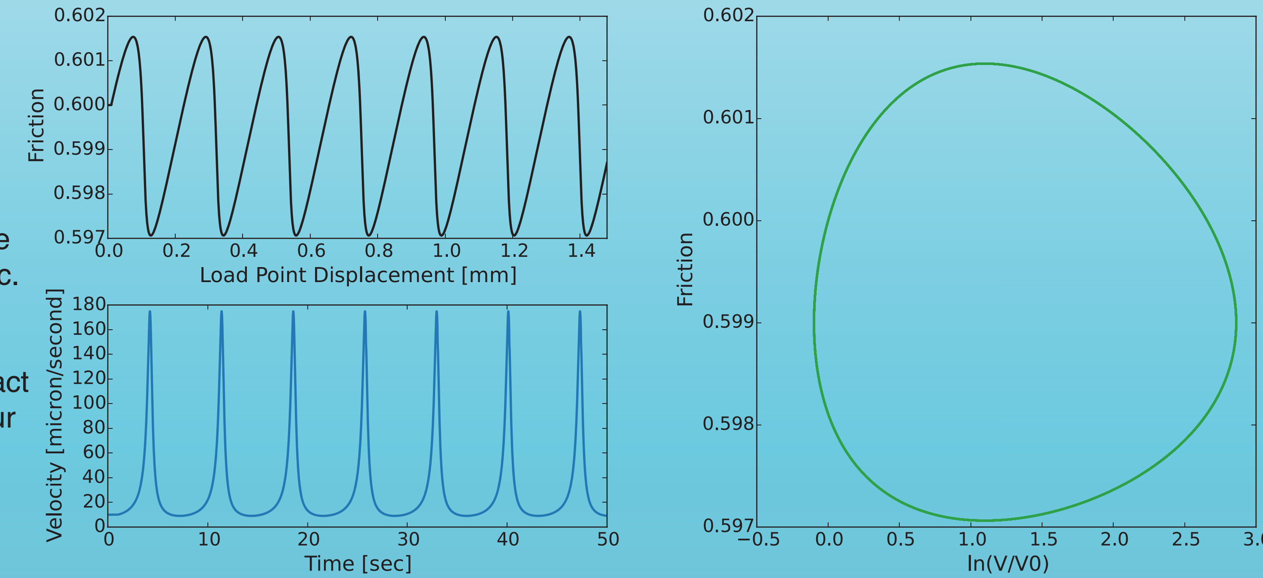
$K/K_c = 0.8$
$V_f/V_0 = 1$
Small Perturbation

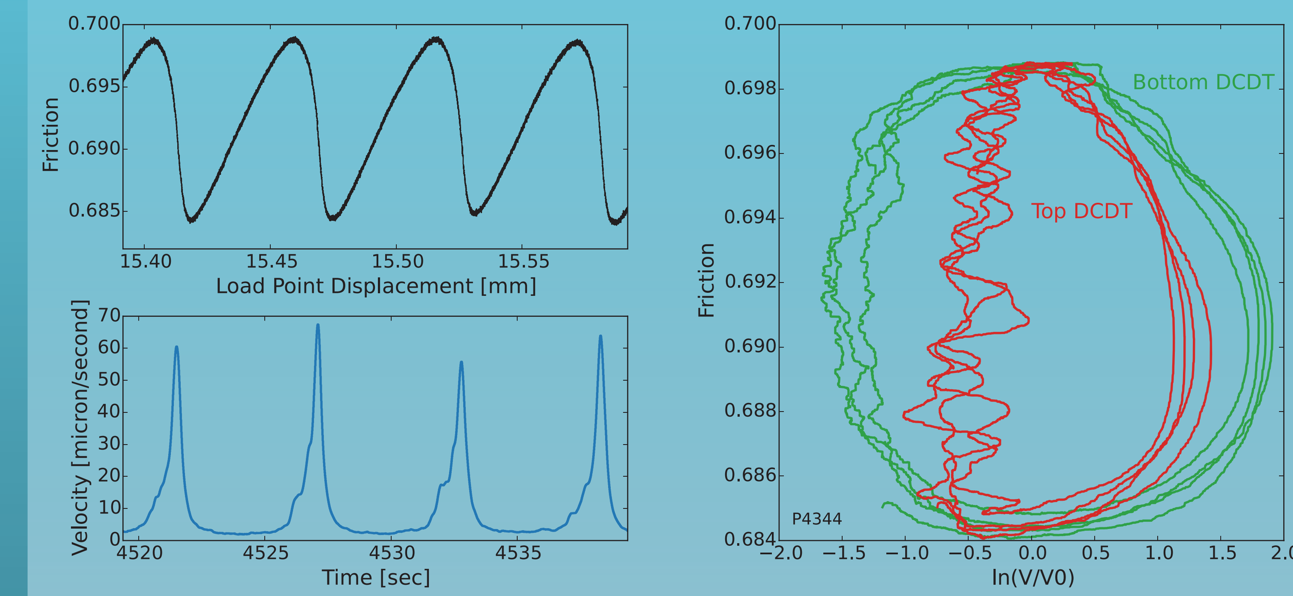
Single state variable models can reproduce emergent instability with small perturbations while below the critical stiffness. These models eventually become fully dynamic and unstable. While inertia or evolving RSF parameters are required to be valid during dynamic fast stick-slip events, this model well represents the beginning of our experiments



$K/K_c = 1$
$V_f/V_0 = 3$
Velocity Step

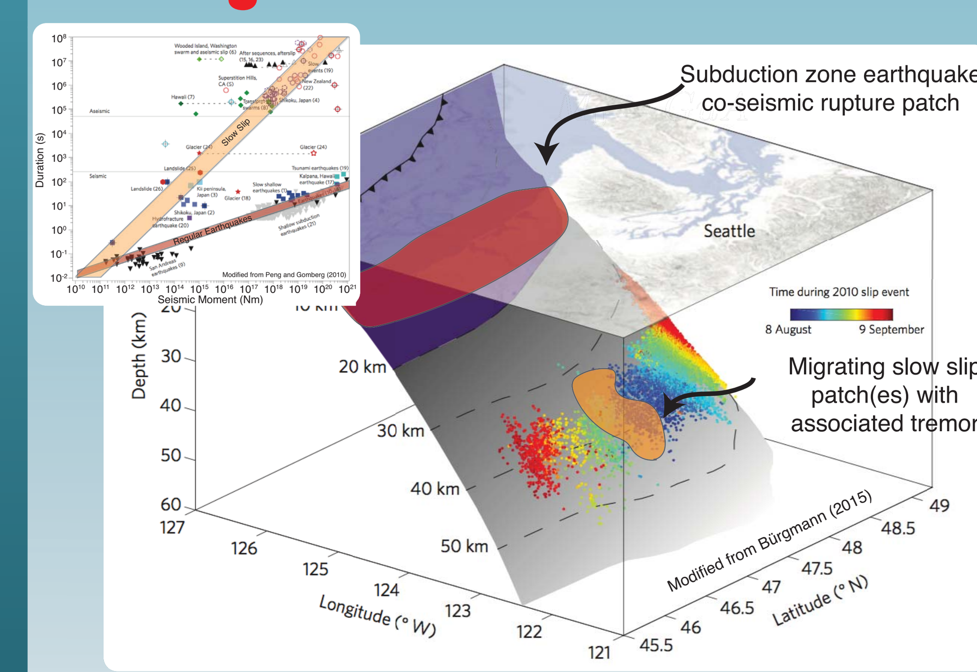
Repeated slow-slip events can be modeled by setting the stiffness equal to the critical stiffness. These events never become fully dynamic. Velocity perturbations from the emerging instability (above) and increasing system stiffness could act in concert to effectively stabilize our slow-slip experiments in approximately these conditions.





- The top DCDT continues to move near the loading velocity, but the bottom almost stops. This is due to strain energy being stored in the elastic center block.
- Velocity profiles for all events are very similar
- Experimental phase plots are similar to model results, but with some noise at low velocities

Scaling Relations



Regular Earthquakes
Seismic patch ruptures in 10's of seconds at most. Slip scales with size of the patch.

$$M_0 \propto T^3$$

Slow Earthquakes
Rupture propagates as a patch of fixed size for hours to years. Slip scales with patch size, not total rupture size.

$$M_0 \propto T$$

We observe the commonality that stress drop scales with duration in a power-law form for both laboratory and natural events (both slow and fast). This further supports a fundamental and common physical mechanism that can produce slow and fast slip events.

- The stiffness of the system with respect to the critical stiffness controls the failure behavior
- Peak slip velocity and duration of slip vary systematically with distance from the stability boundary
- Arguments such as high pore pressure, weak faults, and designer friction are all consistent with this idea
- Single state variable models are capable of reproducing many of the observed behaviors
- The stability argument can be applied to the many diverse areas where slow slip is observed
- Laboratory faults are reasonable representations of real faults with similar characteristics
- Defining slip duration and accounting for displacement during that duration is important