Water-Soluble Cationic Conjugated Polymers: Response to Electron-Rich Bioanalytes

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<tr>
<td>As Published</td>
<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.1021/ja4095395">http://dx.doi.org/10.1021/ja4095395</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>American Chemical Society (ACS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>Author's final manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable Link</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/84619">http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/84619</a></td>
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Water-Soluble Cationic Conjugated Polymers: Response to Electron-Rich Bioanalytes

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<tr>
<th>Journal:</th>
<th><em>Journal of the American Chemical Society</em></th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID:</td>
<td>ja-2013-095395.R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date Submitted by the Author:</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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                             | Swager, Timothy; Mass. Inst. of Tech., Chemistry; Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Chemistry 18-597 |
Conjugated polymer semiconductors have advantageous properties (flexibility, low weight, good processability in solution) that make them useful for optoelectronic and electrochemical devices, including organic solar cells, light-emitting diodes, field-effect transistors, and biosensors. In contrast to p-type conjugated polymers, which are currently the leading class of organic semiconductors, n-type (or electron-transporting) conjugated polymers are still in limited supply and are often hampered by lower performance and stability. This lack of suitable n-type polymeric materials has hindered progress in all polymeric unit 3 with minimal synthetic and purification steps. The reported polymers are also suitable for layer-by-layer (LbL) film formation.

We report the concise synthesis of a symmetrical monomer that provides a head-to-head pyridine building block for the preparation of cationic conjugated polymers. The obtained poly(pyridinium phenylene) polymers display appealing properties such as high electron affinity, charge-transport upon n-doping, and optical response to electron-donating analytes. A simple assay for the optical detection of low micromolar amounts of a variety of analytes in aqueous solution was developed. In particular, caffeine could be measured at a 25 μM detection limit. The reported polymers are also suitable for layer-by-layer (LbL) film formation.

ABSTRACT: We report the concise synthesis of a symmetrical monomer that provides a head-to-head pyridine building block for the preparation of cationic conjugated polymers. The obtained poly(pyridinium phenylene) polymers display appealing properties such as high electron affinity, charge-transport upon n-doping, and optical response to electron-donating analytes. A simple assay for the optical detection of low micromolar amounts of a variety of analytes in aqueous solution was developed. In particular, caffeine could be measured at a 25 μM detection limit. The reported polymers are also suitable for layer-by-layer (LbL) film formation.

Conjugated polymer semiconductors have advantageous properties (flexibility, low weight, good processability in solution) that make them useful for optoelectronic and electrochemical devices including organic solar cells, light-emitting diodes, field-effect transistors, and biosensors. In contrast to p-type conjugated polymers, which are currently the leading class of organic semiconductors, n-type (or electron-transporting) conjugated polymers are still in limited supply and are often hampered by lower performance and stability. This lack of suitable n-type polymeric materials has hindered progress in all polymeric unit 3 with minimal synthetic and purification steps. The reported polymers are also suitable for layer-by-layer (LbL) film formation.

The incorporation of electron-deficient N-heterocyclic aromatics into conjugated polymers to produce n-type compounds with high electron affinities was successfully employed in our laboratory and by others. We recently reported a new class of n-type conjugated polymers based on a pyridinium-phenylene scaffold, that possess reversible redox activities, useful electron affinities, and high electrical conductivities. In these compounds, electron-deficient pyridinium rings were introduced by intramolecular cyclization reactions.

Building on this success, we now introduce a related class of poly(pyridinium phenylene)s, which are more synthetically accessible, thereby facilitating the development of electrochemical and photophysical applications. Further, we demonstrate that these electron-deficient polymers are sensitive to electron-rich analytes and display fluorescence responses to analytes of biological and physiological interest. In particular, an aqueous solution of one of the reported polymers is able to differentiate indole among a series of biologically relevant analytes, and to measure caffeine concentrations down to 25 μM.

Our simplified synthetic scheme conveniently generates monomeric unit 3 with minimal synthetic and purification steps (Scheme 1). The synthesis involves Sonogashira coupling of 5-bromo-2-iodopyridine with propargyl ether to afford precursor 1 in good yield. In the presence of Wilkinson’s catalyst (RhCl(PPh3)3) and excess of protected hex-3-ynyl-1,6-diol (2), diyne 1 undergoes [2+2+2] cycloaddition to afford symmetrical monomer 3. The low yield of this optimized cyclization reaction is mostly attributed to interactions between the metal catalyst and the pyridine rings, and is largely compensated by the simplicity of the synthesis. Furthermore, most of the unreacted alkyn 2 can be recycled.

Scheme 1. Two-step synthesis of monomer 3

Siloxoxyethyl-substituted homopolymer P1 and copolymer P2 were obtained reacting monomer 3 under Yamamoto and Sonogashira coupling conditions, respectively (Scheme 2). In the case of P1, we observed that microwave irradiation combined with high temperature heating in THF was required in order to enhance the molecular weight of the product. This observation is attributed to an improved solubility of P1 in hot THF. Similarly, we observed no formation of Sonogashira-coupling product when monomer 3 and pentiptycne diacytene 4 were reacted under standard (e.g., overnight heating to reflux) conditions. It appears that the lower reactivity of the aryl bromide 3 under Sonogashira conditions, although advantageous for the selective synthesis of precursor 1, is significantly enhanced by the use of superheated solvent in a sealed vessel microwave reactor. Polymers P1 and P2 were found to be soluble in common organic solvents, allowing their convenient purification and characterization. Finally, polyelectrolytes P3 and P4 were obtained by subjecting precursors to intramolecular nucleophilic substitution reactions, and purified by reprecipitation from H2O/THF (P3) or DMSO/H2O followed by washing with H2O, MeOH and CH3Cl (P4). Homopolymer P3...
was found to be soluble in water and trifluoroethanol, whereas copolymer P4 was found to only display significant solubility in DMSO or in formic acid. Meta-stable aqueous solutions of P4 could be prepared by dissolving the polymer in formic acid followed by dilution with water, and these formulations were stable for several hours before precipitation became visible.

**Scheme 2.** Synthetic routes to polymers P3 and P4.

The polycationic polymers P3 and P4 were characterized by $^1$H NMR spectroscopy, absorbance and fluorescence measurements, and by cyclic voltammetry. The optical and electrochemical properties are summarized in Table 1. The absorbance and emission bands of P3 and P4 are red shifted relative to the precursor polymers P1 and P2, as a result of the enhanced planarity induced by cyclization, and of the incorporation of electron accepting pyridiniums (Figures 1a and b, S7 and S8). The pentiptycene fragment induces broader absorbance and emission bands, a larger Stokes shift, and red-shifted bands compared to P3. The electron affinities (EA) of P3 and P4 are evaluated based on the onset reduction potential in thin film cyclic voltammetry measurements, and are estimated at 3.95 and 3.91 eV, respectively. These values are comparable to those of well-known electron transporters PCBM (4.2 eV) and polybenzimidazobenzodioxole (BBD, 4.0 eV). The conductivity of a film of polymer P3 was estimated with in situ measurement carried out on interdigitated microelectrodes (Figure 1c). Inherent non-uniformity in the film limits the accuracy of this method, however these measurements clearly reveal that conductivity appears with reduction of the polymer. Significant conductivity was recorded at moderately reducing potentials (1.7 S cm$^{-1}$ at -1.36 V vs. SCE), and the fully reduced (neutral) polymer was found to be insulating. Spectroelectrochemical measurements of polymer thin films deposited on ITO-coated electrodes (Figures 1d and S11) revealed that upon reduction of the polymers, the bandgap absorbance significantly decreases, and new mid-gap energy states appear, which is in agreement with our conductivity measurements and the polaron-bipolaron theory for conjugated polymer doping. This effect is less pronounced for polymer P4 where the redox-active groups may be effectively isolated by the interveining non-redox active repeating unit.

**Figure 1.** a) Normalized absorbance (red) and emission (blue) spectra of polymer P3 in aqueous solution (solid line) and thin film (dotted line); b) Normalized absorbance (red) and emission (blue) spectra of polymer P4 in formic acid/PBS (5-95) solution (solid line) and thin film (dotted line); c) Cyclic voltammogram of P3 (black curve, 100 mV · s$^{-1}$) and in situ conductivity measurement (blue curve, 5 mV · s$^{-1}$). The deviations below zero are the result of overlapping current from Faradaic processes; d) Spectroelectrochemistry of P3 (thin film).

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<tr>
<th>Polymer (s)</th>
<th>$\lambda_{\text{max}}$ (nm)</th>
<th>$\epsilon_{\text{max}}$ (L·mol$^{-1}$·cm$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>$E_{\text{onset}}^a$ (V)</th>
<th>$E_{\text{red}}^b$ (V)</th>
<th>$E_{\text{onset}}^c$ (V)</th>
<th>$\text{EA}^c$ (eV)</th>
<th>$\text{IP}^d$ (eV)</th>
<th>$\text{PL}_{\text{max}}$ (nm)</th>
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<td>P3 (s)</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>33000</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>445</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3 (f)</td>
<td>11150</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>522</td>
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<tr>
<td>P4 (s)</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>556</td>
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<tr>
<td>P4 (f)</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>556</td>
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$^a$ $E_{\text{onset}}$: Band gap estimated from the onset ($\lambda_{\text{onset}}$) of the absorption spectra. $E_{\text{red}}$: Formal and onset reduction potentials (vs. SCE). $^b$ $\text{EA}$: Electron affinity obtained based on $\text{EA} = E_{\text{onset}}^c + 4.4$ (eV). $^d$ $\text{IP}$: Ionization potential calculated from $\text{IP} = \text{EA} + E_{\text{g}}^d$ (eV).

Taking advantage of the polycationic nature of polymers P3 and P4, we investigated the possibility of forming well defined films using the layer-by-layer deposition (LbL) technique in association with anionic poly(styrene sulfonate) (PSS). The absorbance spectra shown in Figure 2a and S12-S13 demonstrate that LbL films are efficiently formed upon alternate exposure of an ITO-coated glass substrate to aqueous solutions of P3 (or P4) and PSS. The absorbance was found to increase linearly with the number of deposited layers, indicating a well-behaved deposition process. Cyclic voltammetry performed on LbL-deposited films (25 bilayers) indicates that the multilayer films remain stable during redox changes. As expected, the peak currents were found to increase linearly with the scan rates (Figure 2b, S14-S15). Spectroelectrochemical experiments reveal electrochromism similar to that observed with polymer thin films, with a significantly improved reversibility in the case of P3 (Figure 2d). Following application of a sufficiently reducing potential, the initially orange film turns blue due to the reduction of P3. The initial color is recovered upon reoxidization, and the color changes occur within about 5 s.
Nevertheless, the fact that indole responds differently than any presence of interacting aromatic molecules. For example, alternative polymer. Potential conjugated polymers and was rationalized by electron affinity) is particularly well-suited to interact with electron-donating aromatic analytes. Although phenylalanine does not possess an easily oxidizable aromatic ring, it still induces a strong fluorescence increase. Further, the importance of the hydrophobic iptycenes in the sensing process is confirmed by the fact that homopolymer P3 shows no significant optical response in the presence of the tested analytes. Nevertheless, the fact that indole responds differently than any other studied analyte (including closely-related tryptophan, that induces an 11% increase in fluorescence intensity) potentially provides a powerful level of selectivity, where a single specific analyte is detected against several others.

To evaluate its utility as a sensory material, we investigated the response of copolymer P4 to a series of analytes of biological interest. Although P4 is relatively weakly emissive in solution, its high ionization potential (and associated high excited-state electron affinity) is particularly well-suited to interact with electron-rich analytes. Indeed solutions of P4 in water (15 µg mL⁻¹, formate buffer, pH 3.6) give responses to 100 µM of electron-donating aromatic analytes (Figure 3a). The majority of the heterocycles give an enhancement in the emission, however indole induces a 48% decrease in the fluorescence intensity. This quenching is consistent with our previous work on high ionization potential conjugated polymers and was rationalized by electron-transfer quenching from the electron-donating analyte to the polymer. In order to gain more insight into the quenching mechanism, we performed Stern-Volmer quenching experiments, observing both the emission intensity and lifetime as a function of the indole concentration. The linear increase in quenching with the concentration of indole illustrated in Figure 3b reveals a Stern-Volmer constant $K_{SV} = 9.5(0.6) \cdot 10^{-1} M^{-1}$ and an estimated detection limit of 25 µM. The fluorescence lifetime ($\tau = 0.4$ ns) was found to be invariant as indole was added to the solution, pointing towards a static quenching mechanism. The fact that the other investigated analytes produced an increase in the emission intensity admittedly was unexpected and suggests a more complex interaction mechanism between the analytes and the polymer. Copolymer P4 has large hydrophobic surfaces and we assume that intramolecular hydrophobic interactions have a strong impact on the polymer structure in solution, that can be influenced by the presence of interacting aromatic molecules. For example, although phenylalanine does not possess an easily oxidizable aromatic ring, it still induces a strong fluorescence increase. Further, the importance of the hydrophobic iptycenes in the sensing process is confirmed by the fact that homopolymer P3 shows no significant optical response in the presence of the tested analytes.

The second analyte of particular interest was caffeine. In the presence of 100 µM of caffeine, the fluorescence intensity of the polymer solution increased by 38%, the largest measured increase over our panel of analytes. A titration study performed with various concentrations of caffeine allowed to estimate a detection limit of 25 µM (Figures 3c and S17), which makes our sensing scheme competitive with formerly reported schemes for the solution-based optical sensing of caffeine. In particular, a detection limit of 50 µM was recently reported using polysulfonated pyrenes as molecular probes. We were able to use P4 to estimate the caffeine content of a series of everyday products. In this procedure, the selected samples were extracted (coffee and decaffeinated coffee, soda, energy drink, and a painkiller) into dichloromethane and evaporated, in order to minimize the influence of the matrix. The extracts were then redissolved in formate buffer and added into aqueous solutions of polymer P4. The change in fluorescence intensity was measured, and the caffeine content in the samples was then calculated using the calibration curve displayed in Figure 3c. This procedure yielded caffeine concentrations within a reasonable margin of error for most samples, but coffee and decaffeinated coffee displayed erroneously high values (Figure 4). These discrepancies may be the result of additional analytes present in the beverages that interfere in a non-selective fashion with P4 and contribute to the fluorescence increase.
Further studies to elucidate the interaction mechanisms behind the interest in aqueous solutions, such as indole and caffeine. They can be conveniently processed using simple layer-by-layer methodologies, and we also demonstrated that such polymers can act as optical probes for various analyses of biological interest in aqueous solutions, such as indole and caffeine. Further studies to elucidate the interaction mechanisms behind the fluorescence responses are required in order to fine-tune the sensing abilities of these compounds.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT
Supporting Information
Synthesis, characterization and properties of the investigated compounds, and structures of the tested bioanalytes. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interests.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (fellowships PBELP2-135845 and PA00P2-145389) and the Army Research Office through the Institute for Soldier Nanotechnologies.

REFERENCES
(38) A series of other catalysts commonly employed for this type of reaction was screened (e.g., [Ru(cod)Cl2], CpRu(Ph3)Cl2, RhCl3, Co(CO)8, CoCl2, CpCo(CO)2 or CpZrCl2 under various conditions), and only Wilkinson's catalyst was found to afford the desired product in significant amount.
(43) Difficulties in processing polymer P4 made it impossible to reliably detect conductivity by in situ measurements.