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Continuous-flow Production of Succinic Anhydrides via Catalytic β-Lactone Carbonylation by Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101

Hoyoung D. Park‡, Mircea Dincă‡,* and Yuriy Román-Leshkov†,*

†Department of Chemical Engineering and ‡Department of Chemistry, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139, United States

Supporting Information Placeholder

ABSTRACT: Industrial synthesis of succinic acid relies on hydrocarbon oxidation or biomass fermentation routes that suffer from energy-costly separation processes. Here we demonstrate an alternate route to succinic anhydrides via β-lactone carbonylation by heterogeneous bimetallic ion-pair catalysis in Co(CO)$_4$-incorporated Cr-MIL-101 (Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101, Cr-MIL-101 = Cr$_6$(BDC)$_3$·H$_2$BDC = 1,4-benzeneedicarboxylic acid). Postsynthetically introduced Co(CO)$_4$ facilitates CO insertion to β-lactone substrates activated by the Lewis acidic Cr(III) centers of the metal–organic framework (MOF), leading to catalytic carbonylation with activity and selectivity profiles that compare favorably to those reported for homogeneous ion-pair catalysts. Moreover, the heterogeneous nature of the MOF catalyst enables continuous production of succinic anhydride through a packed bed reactor, with room temperature β-propiolactone carbonylation activity of 1,300 mol$_{anhydride}$/mol$_{Cr}$ over 6 h on stream. Simple evaporation of the fully converted product stream yields the desired anhydride as isolated solids, highlighting the unique processing advantages conferred by this first example of heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation pathway.

As a representative four-carbon diacid, succinic acid is finding increasingly wide use as a precursor to high-value products in polymer,† food,‡ agriculture,§ and pharmaceutical‖ industries. Its production, however, has traditionally depended on the energy-intensive benzene or n-butane oxidation pathway that features high operating temperatures,¶ limited yields of ~60% due to side oxidation reactions,¶ and incineration of waste gases owing to difficult separation of unreacted substrates.¶ To address this issue, the United States Department of Energy named succinic acid as the first chemical on its list of twelve “Top Value Added Chemicals From Biomass” and fostered the development of milder fermentative routes to succinic acids.¶ There has since been significant progress in the development of commercial-scale fermentation processes to succinates, giving rise to numerous processes with kilotonne-scale annual capacities.¶ Nonetheless, microbial fermentation processes present their own challenges, namely, undesired metabolic flux to byproducts¶ and costly product separation and purification from the fermentation broth that can account for up to 60–70% of the total production cost.¶

Heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation is a process that can potentially circumvent current limitations in hydrocarbon oxidation and microbial fermentation pathways. Due to their inherent ring strain, the four-membered β-lactone cycles undergo selective ring-expanding carbonylation to succinic anhydrides under conditions much milder than those of the hydrocarbon oxidation process.¶ Facile recovery of the carbonylated product from the solid catalyst and solvent avoids energy-intensive separations from the fermentation broth required in fermentative processes. In addition, ready availability of β-lactone substrates from industrially accessible epoxides further underscores the intrinsic advantages of the heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation strategy.¶

Herein, we report Co(CO)$_4$-incorporated Cr-MIL-101 (Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101, Cr-MIL-101 = Cr$_6$(BDC)$_3$·H$_2$BDC = 1,4-benzeneedicarboxylic acid) as the first heterogeneous catalyst for the selective ring-expansion carbonylation of β-lactones to succinic anhydrides. Competitive activity and selectivity profiles under mild conditions, along with ease of continuous-flow operation and product separations showcase the unique advantages of Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101. More importantly, these results stand to illustrate the potential of the heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation pathway as a viable route to large-scale production of succinic anhydrides.

Our initial discovery of β-lactone carbonylation by Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101 was guided by mechanistic studies on heterocycle carbonylation by homogeneous [Lewis acid][Co(CO)$_4$] ion-pair catalysts. It has been proposed that β-lactone carbonylation by [Lewis acid][Co(CO)$_4$] follows a mechanism analogous to that of epoxide carbonylation: (1) substrate activation by [Lewis acid]+, (2) ring opening by Co(CO)$_4$., (3) CO insertion, and (4) product extrusion (Figure 1A).¶ Based on this mechanistic similarity, we hypothesized that our previously reported Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101, a metal–organic framework (MOF)-based epoxide carbonylation catalyst featuring Lewis acidic Cr(III) secondary building units ion-paired with postsynthetically exchanged Co(CO)$_4$⊂Cr-MIL-101 (Figure 1B), would also be able to carbonylate β-lactones to succinic anhydrides.¶ We reasoned that the structural properties of Cr-MIL-101 found favorable for epoxide carbonylation would also be advantageous for β-lactone carbonylation: high surface area, large pore openings (12 Å and 16 Å) and pore diameters (29 Å and 34 Å) for low diffusional barrier to active sites, and high
pressure was increased to promote CO insertion, and (3) reaction temperature was lowered to favor carbonylation featuring a presumably lower activation barrier (Figure 2).14,18 These manipulations combined to promote a clear preference for the carbonylation pathway, with the selectivity for anhydride reaching ~87% under optimized conditions (Figures 2 and S6).

Selective carbonylation activity observed with the β-butyrolactone substrate led us to conduct subsequent studies using β-propiolactone to examine the applicability of Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 for the commercially-desirable unsubstituted succinic anhydride. Remarkably, when Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 loaded at 0.3 Co mol % with respect to the substrate was charged with a 1.8 M solution of β-propiolactone in toluene and 15 bar of CO for 18 h at room temperature, succinic anhydride was obtained as the sole reaction product in 92% yield without the poly(3-hydroxypropionate) byproduct (Table 1, entry 2 and Figure S7). This corresponds to an overall site time yield of 16 h⁻¹, an improvement over the value of 12 h⁻¹ reported for the homogeneous [salph]Al(THF)₂][Co(CO)₄] under analogous conditions (Table 1, entry 1).

To probe the catalytic cooperativity between the framework Cr(III) sites and the post-synthetically introduced Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 for the synthesis of the commercially-desirable unsubstituted succinic anhydride, we sought to increase selectivity to the desired anhydride product. Given the competitive nature of the two parallel pathways, we sought to increase selectivity to the desired anhydride product by exploiting the differences in the reaction kinetics of the carbonylation and polymerization pathways. To this effect, reaction conditions were altered as follows: (1) substrate concentration was lowered to suppress β-lactone monomer propagation, (2) CO

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** (A) Proposed catalytic cycle for the ring-expansion carbonylation of β-lactones by [Lewis acid][Co(CO)₄]₄.14 (B) Illustration of the metal cluster structure of Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 with coordinated tetrahydrofuran molecules.15

chemical and thermal stability for robust catalysis.16 Synthetic accessibility of the catalyst through relatively inexpensive chromium, cobalt, and terephthalic acid precursors also distinguished Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 as an attractive candidate for use in the industrially-relevant β-lactone carbonylation.

Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 was prepared as previously reported (Figures S1−S5 and Table S1) and subjected to batch-wise carbonylation reactions with β-butyrolactone as a model substrate. When Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101 loaded at 0.5 Co mol % with respect to the substrate was exposed to a 1.8 M solution of β-butyrolactone in toluene and 15 bar of CO at 80 °C for 24 h, full conversion of the substrate was observed, in line with what was reported for the homogenous catalyst [(salph)Al(THF)₂][Co(CO)₄] (salph = N,N'-o-phenylenebis(3,5-di-tert-butylsalicylideneimine), THF = tetrahydrofuran).17 However, the product solution contained not only the desired methylsuccinic anhydride, but also poly(3-hydroxybutyrate) as a major side product (Figure S6). Mixed formation of both the anhydride and the poly(lactone) has been reported for a number of [Lewis acid][Co(CO)₄] catalysts. It is the result of a competitive reaction where subsequent to substrate ring-opening, CO insertion leads to the desired carbonylation cycle while the alternative β-lactone insertion propagates the polymerization reaction (Figure 1A).14 Given the competitive nature of the two parallel pathways, we sought to increase selectivity to the desired anhydride product by exploiting the differences in the reaction kinetics of the carbonylation and polymerization pathways. To this effect, reaction conditions were altered as follows: (1) substrate concentration was lowered to suppress β-lactone monomer propagation, (2) CO

![Figure 2](image)

**Figure 2.** Selectivity to succinic anhydride as a function of the reaction conditions for batch carbonylation of β-butyrolactone by Co(CO)₄⊂Cr-MIL-101. Catalyst loaded at 0.5 Co mol % to the substrate in toluene and allowed to react for >75% conversion of the substrate under all conditions tested.

**Table 1. Batch Carbonylation of β-Propiolactone.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Catalyst</th>
<th>t (h)</th>
<th>Yield (%)</th>
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ACS Paragon Plus Environment
1. [(salp)Al(THF)]2[Co(CO)4] 24 98
2. Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 18 92
3. Cr-MIL-101 18 0
4. Na[Co(CO)₄] 18 12
5. Cr-MIL-101 + Na[Co(CO)₄] 18 43

* As determined by ¹H-NMR analysis against mesitylene as a standard. *b Cr-MIL-101 + Na[Co(CO)₄] = equimolar mixture of the two species.

compared to using either precursor individually, the equimolar mixture was still inferior to Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 with pre-installed Cr/Co sites (Table 1, entry 5). We attribute this behavior to an incomplete in-situ formation of Cr/Co sites that leads to fractional carbonylation activity for the mixture of Cr-MIL-101 and Na[Co(CO)₄]. The need for the coexistence of both the Lewis acidic Cr(III) and Co(CO)₄ for appreciable carbonylation activity suggests Cr/Co cooperative catalysis to be active for Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101.

When several solvents were screened for optimizing β-propiolactone carbonylation activity with Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101, the highest activities were observed with non-coordinating solvents such as toluene and dichloromethane (DCM) (Table S2, entries 1 and 2). Reactions in coordinating solvents greatly reduced carbonylation activity, as exemplified by the low yields from reactions with 1,2-dimethoxyethane, tetrahydrofuran, and acetonitrile (Table S2, entries 3–5). These results deviate from the solvent dependence observed for epoxide carbonylation by Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101, in which mildly coordinating solvents, such as 1,2-dimethoxyethane, were found to be ideal. A similar discrepancy has been observed for various homogeneous catalysts of the general formula [Lewis acid][Co(CO)₄], where β-lactone carbonylation proceeded much faster in solvents that are less coordinating than those optimal for epoxide carbonylation. This behavior has been accredited to substrate activation and ring-opening being the rate limiting step for β-lactone carbonylation, where Lewis basic solvents more effectively compete for coordination to the Lewis acidic metal sites and hinder substrate ring-opening by Co(CO)₄. (Figure 1A). Observation of an analogous solvent dependence with Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 lends credence to a similar mechanistic explanation may be applicable to β-lactone carbonylation by Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101.

In order to confirm the heterogeneous nature of catalysis by Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101, a β-propiolactone carbonylation reaction mixture at ~35% conversion was divided into two aliquots, one of which was filtered (Figure S8). When the filtrate and the unfiltered fraction were allowed to further react, the anhydride yield did not increase for the filtrate whereas the unfiltered portion resumed its carbonylation activity. The crystalline structure of Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 was also maintained throughout all carbonylation reactions, as verified by powder X-ray diffraction analysis of spent Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 (Figure S9).

Having confirmed the heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation activity by Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101, we designed a laboratory-scale packed-bed reactor process to study Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 under continuous-flow conditions (Figure S10). As a singular example among all β-lactone carbonylation catalysts developed to date, when Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 at room temperature was subjected to a flow of 0.1 M β-propiolactone in DCM at 0.1 ml/min or a weight hourly space velocity (WHSV) of 1,200 h⁻¹ and an excess CO flow of 30 ml/min at 45 bar, succinic anhydride was obtained as the sole product at 1,300 mol₄-anhydride mol⁻¹ over 6 h on stream (Figures 3A and S11). Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 was also able to carbonate β-butyrolactone cleanly to the respective methylocicyclic anhydride, with an activity of 360 mol₄-anhydride mol⁻¹ over 60 h on stream at 40 °C when exposed to a flow of 0.5 M β-butyrolactone in toluene at 0.02 ml/min or a WHSV of 7.1 h⁻¹ and an excess CO flow of 30 ml/min at 30 bar (Figures 3B and S11). The dramatically higher activity observed with β-propiolactone is in line with the proposed S₄2 attack on the β-carbon of the lactone by Co(CO)₄. (Figure 1A), where decreased steric hindrance on the β-carbon leads to a significant increase in activity. β-carbolonylation activity was also highly sensitive to CO pressure, where stability of the observed activity profiles was impaired at lower CO pressures for both β-propiolactone and β-butyrolactone substrates (Figure 3). This behavior parallels the analogous CO pressure dependence observed in batch carbonylation studies, suggesting that competing side reactions, such as β-lactone homopolymerization, may be a major cause of deactivation.

A key feature of β-lactone carbonylation by Co(CO)₅Cr-MIL-101 is the ease of product recovery from the heterogeneous catalyst. When catalyst loading was increased to fully convert the substrate in a continuous-flow β-propiolactone carbonylation, ambient evaporation of the volatile DCM from the product stream led to isolation of the desired succinic anhydride as a crystalline solid (Figure S12). Similar results were obtained from batch-wise β-propiolactone carbonylation studies, where filtration of the solid
catalyst and subsequent evaporation of the fully converted product mixture resulted in recovery of succinic anhydride crystals. These simple operations greatly contrast the complicated separations schemes required in hydrocarbon oxidation or microbial fermentation processes (e.g., NH\textsubscript{4}H\textsubscript{2}SO\textsubscript{4}-assisted succinate precipitation, NaOH-assisted electrodialysis, amines-assisted reactive extraction, etc.,)\textsuperscript{19} and further corroborates the potential of our heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation pathway for the industrial production of succinic anhydrides.

In summary, we report Co(CO)\textsubscript{4}c-Cr-MIL-101 as the first heterogeneous catalyst for the selective ring-expanding carbonylation of β-lactones to succinic anhydrides. Its facile application to a packed-bed reactor process for continuous production and recovery of succinic anhydrides substantiates the potential efficacy of the heterogeneous β-lactone carbonylation pathway. We ascribe the favorable performance of the catalyst to the intrinsic structural advantages of the MOF platform, which supports precise coordination geometries\textsuperscript{20–22} as isolated single sites\textsuperscript{23–25} within a robust porous scaffold\textsuperscript{26–28} for novel catalytic applications. We believe these unique structural properties could be leveraged for the development of an improved class of heterogeneous catalysts. In addition, identification of an optimum flow reactor configuration through reaction kinetics studies is anticipated to further enhance the performance of the β-lactone carbonylation process.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website. Experimental information and supplementary data (PDF).

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author

*Email: mdinca@mit.edu
*Email: yroman@mit.edu

Notes

The authors are listed as inventors on a patent pertaining to the results herein.

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