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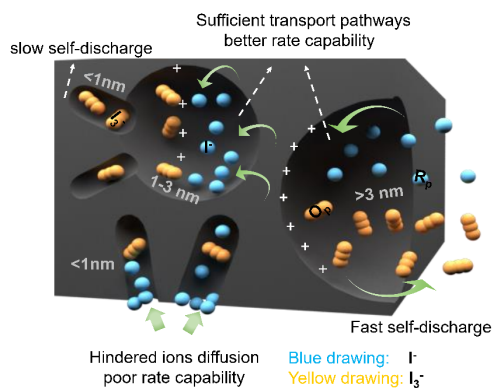
What structural features make porous carbons work for redox-enhanced electrochemical capacitors? - A fundamental study

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Abstract:

The addition of redox-active molecules into electrochemical capacitor electrolytes provides faradaic charge capacity and increases specific energy density. Soluble redox couples, however, also dramatically increase self-discharge if they cannot be effectively confined within the porous carbon electrodes and prevented from diffusing across the charged device. Controlling the porous carbon electrode structure and properties is therefore critical for high-performance devices, although the underlying design principles for the porous carbon are essentially unknown. Herein we illustrate the operational mechanisms and design principles for hierarchical porous carbons in redox-enhanced electrochemical capacitors. Both commercial and laboratory-synthesized carbons were explored as electrode materials and systematically studied as understand the effect of (i) pore size ranging from micropores (0.6 – 2 nm) to mesopores (2 -3 nm, 5 – 30 nm), (ii) specific surface area from ~500 to ~4000 m²/g, and (iii) free macroscopic void space in the electrode, using iodide as a model redox-active additive in aqueous electrolyte. We discover that the redox capacity is correlated to the pore volume of carbon electrodes when void space is included. Rate capability and self-discharge, on the other hand, are correlated to the pore size. The fastest rates are observed typically with pore-sizes > 1 nm, while slow self-discharge requires high specific surface area contributed by pores < 1 nm that adsorb and confine the polyiodide generated in the charged state. When used without an ion-selective membrane separator, the delivered capacity correlated with the quantity of redox species held within the carbon, not with the overall amount in the electrolyte throughout the cell. A commercial microporous carbon, MSC30, with substantial hierarchy in pore size including small < 0.8 nm pores and larger 1.1-3 nm pores showed the best overall performance.

TOC Graphic



Electrochemical energy storage is important as the world decarbonizes and electrifies. Devices such as supercapacitors or electrochemical capacitors (ECs) can deliver high power and exceptional cycle life compared to secondary batteries (often $> 10^6$ cycles), but have low specific energy. A ‘redox-enhanced’ strategy utilizing reversible redox reactions in the electrolyte to add faradaic charge storage increases the energy density of ECs. These features could make them useful in the growing automotive market.¹⁻⁵ The performance of redox-enhanced ECs (redox ECs) is limited in part, however, by self-discharge due to the uncontrolled and unwanted diffusion of the charged redox species, resulting in charge losses.⁶

Despite improvements in the electrolyte formulations and expanded fundamental understanding of electrolyte processes in redox ECs,⁷⁻¹⁰ a basic understanding of how the carbon electrode material’s structure, which usually consists of a hierarchy of pore sizes ranging from sub-nm to many microns in the free space, effects performance is missing. For redox ECs, where diffusive transport of the soluble redox couple is critical, a network of larger pores is likely important for higher power. However, there is an expected trade-off between the pore size and the specific surface area (SSA). Smaller pores which contribute substantially to the SSA should effect self-discharge in the charged cell by adsorbing and confining the redox species (that form sparingly soluble complexes when charged in the most-successful implementations).¹¹ This trade-off suggests hierarchically porous structures are needed for optimal power, capacity, and self-discharge behavior.

Several studies have discussed the behavior of aqueous redox couples using porous carbon electrodes. Larger capacity was observed with a higher total surface area (1470 vs 676 m²/g) and a larger average pore size (1.36 vs 1.06 nm) when utilizing 1 M KI as the electrolyte.¹² In separate work, activated carbon with larger pores (2 – 3 nm) was claimed to exhibit higher specific capacity when 0.08 M KI was added in 1 M H₂SO₄ electrolyte.¹³ Low self-discharge rates were credited to nanopores less than 1 nm when using ZnI₂ redox species.¹⁴ From these studies, however, no general guidelines regarding the roles of the different pore sizes are clear.

While several studies have illustrated how carbon porosity influences the double-layer (DL) capacitance,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ faradaic processes are more complex, involving mass transport of uncharged and charged species, the development of concentration gradients, and potential-dependent adsorption/release of the redox species within the pores (**Figure 1**).¹⁸ To participate in a charge-storage process, the redox species (here I⁻) must first be able to reach the carbon/electrolyte

interface on the timescale of the charging step. Thus, I^- already confined within the pores of the carbon or adsorbed on the carbon surface is expected to provide faradaic capacity on a short timescale via fast faradaic processes (**3 and 4 in Figure 1**). Redox species within the larger void space between the porous carbon particles must diffuse further to reach the carbon surface, and thus should respond slower. Redox species contained in the electrolyte filling the separator or the opposite carbon electrode would need to move macroscopic distances to contribute faradaic capacity and thus would be expected to respond only on long timescales (**1 and 2 in Figure 1**).

Because the external surface area is much smaller than the internal surface area of a porous electrode, the electrochemical reaction will primarily take place within the pores. Redox species outside of the pores (e.g., in the separator) may primarily react on the outer surface of the porous carbon, especially at high rates when there is insufficient time to diffuse into the pores. Concurrently, soluble species in the charged state (in this case triiodide), which are not sufficiently confined inside the pores or adsorbed on the carbon pore walls, can diffuse into the bulk electrolyte, transfer to the opposite electrode, and discharge, reforming I^- (**5-7 in Figure 1**). This self-discharge process lowers coulombic efficiency. Thus, there is likely a tradeoff between large internal surface area needed for fast electrochemical reaction as well as to adsorb/hold the charged species and the need to provide pore volume to hold the redox electrolyte in close proximity to the carbon for high power. These expected tradeoffs suggest that the pore size distribution, free volume, and internal surface area are all key properties in porous carbons for redox ECs that must be co-optimized to achieve high-power density, high energy density, long cycle life and slow self-discharge.

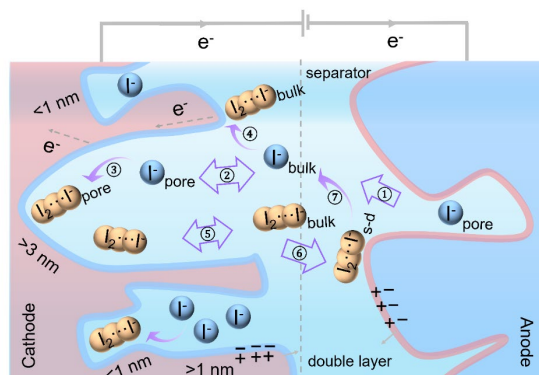
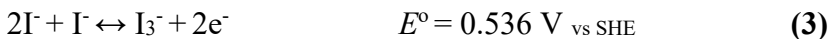
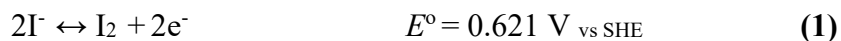


Figure 1. Illustration of charge-storage mechanism involving multiple physical transfer processes in the porous carbon electrodes and bulk solution. Iodide is used as the redox species. Self-discharge is denoted by the abbreviation s-d.

Herein we report the study of a range of commercial and laboratory-synthesized carbons for redox ECs. We focus on their pore-size distributions, ranging from micropore (0.6 – 2 nm) to mesopore (2 – 3 nm, 5 – 30 nm), specific surface area from ~500 to ~4000 m²/g, as well as free volume in the electrode, to understand the operational mechanisms and how performance is affected by the pore structure. We then provide design guidelines for carbon-electrode engineering to maximize overall device performance of redox ECs. Halide ions such as iodide, the representative example used herein, undergo fast redox reactions on the surface of carbon materials. Iodide is less corrosive than bromide (when oxidized),^{19, 20} and thus better suited for fundamental investigation. The oxidation (charging) reaction in aqueous electrolyte can be divided into two steps:^{21, 22} the I⁻ is first converted to I₂ and then complexed with remaining I⁻ in the electrolyte to form water soluble I₃⁻:



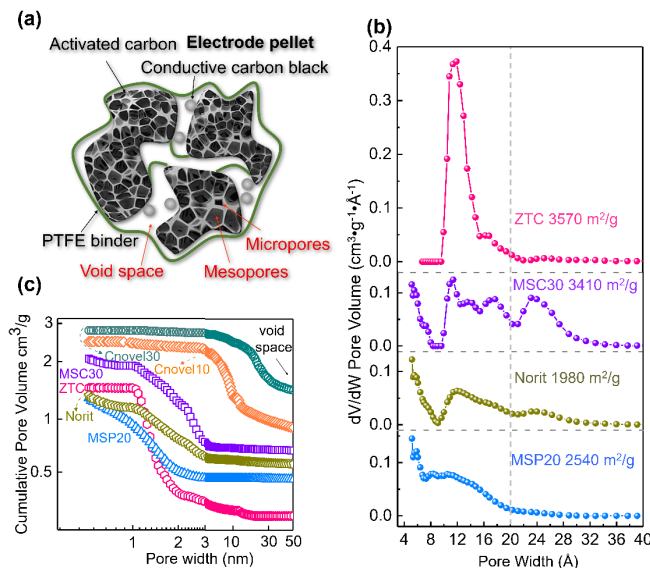


Figure 2. Structural properties of different carbons. (a) Schematic showing the porous structure of a carbon electrode on a microscopic scale, consisting of binder, conductive additive, void space between particles, mesopores, and micropores. (b) The micropore-size distributions of MSC30, Norit, MSP20, and ZTC, measured by N_2 physisorption at 77 K. The numbers labelled represent the specific BET surface area. (c) The cumulative pore volume curves for different carbon electrodes (normalized by the dry mass of the electrode) in a combination of micro-, meso-, and void space volume, including Cnovel30 (dark cyan), Cnovel10 (orange), MSC30 (purple), Norit (olive), MSP20 (blue), and ZTC (pink).

Porous structures of various carbons. Here we consider the question: what inherent structures make a particular porous carbon a good candidate for redox ECs? For simplicity, we consider specific power, specific energy, and self-discharge rate for five different activated carbons (MSC30, MSP20, Norit, Cnovel10, and Cnovel30) which range from microporous to mesoporous (**Figure 2b**, **Figure S1-S3**). The list also includes a unique zeolite-templated carbon (ZTC), which has an atomically-thin ordered framework, a well-controlled pore size²³⁻²⁵ (1.2 nm as-synthesized, **Figure 2b**) with almost no narrow micropores (< 1 nm), very few larger micropores and high specific surface area ($3570 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$). Due to electrical conductivity and microporosity, ZTCs have been investigated as electrode materials in supercapacitors,^{26, 27} hybrid capacitors,²⁸ and rechargeable batteries.^{29, 30}

Heteroatom-doped carbons have shown increased DL capacitance³¹ and the ability to better capture halide anions compared to pure carbons.³² We first excluded the existence of N or B by performing X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis (**Figure S2**). Trace amounts of S

were detected in some mesoporous carbons (Cnovel10 and Cnovel30), which we assumed would have a negligible effect on the redox of halide anions, when comparing the porous structures.

Activated carbon particles exhibit a non-uniform morphology at the micron length scale and a broad particle-size distribution (see electron microscopy images in **Figures S5 and S6**). The particles also have a range of pores with dimensions from angstroms to nanometers. In most published work, only a single parameter, such as the mean pore diameter or total surface area, is reported and used to determine structure-performance relationships. Given the multiple length scales over which diffusion, reaction, adsorption, etc. occur in a redox EC, we report a range of parameters to describe the distribution of pore sizes and free volume. Unlike ZTC, a wide distribution of pore sizes were observed in the microporous region for three different activated carbons (**Figure 2b**). These three activated carbons include ultra-narrow micropores (< 0.8 nm), which contribute substantially to the total surface area. Pores < 1 nm for MSC30 and Norit contribute ~ 930 m²/g and ~ 900 m²/g to the SSA, respectively (**Table S1**). MSC30 has a primary contribution from pores between 1.1 - 3 nm, Norit contains a primary contribution from micropores between 1.1 - 1.6 nm along with a small fraction from pores between 2 - 3 nm, and MSP20 has mainly pores < 1.1 nm. Two mesoporous carbon, Cnovel10 and Cnovel30, have mean mesopore size of 5 - 10 nm and 20 - 30 nm, respectively (**Figure S3**).

Porous carbon electrodes in ECs are typically composites, consisting of mixtures of activated carbon, conductive additive (e.g., carbon black), and binder (e.g., PTFE) along with void space. These voids are much larger (typically micron-sized)³³ than the solvated ion. The voids contribute minimally to the total double-layer capacitance, as they provide little surface area, but are likely important for holding a reservoir of redox electrolyte that provides the faradaic capacity. Void-space data is not normally measured or reported for redox ECs. Here we estimate void space by combining helium gas pycnometry and N₂ adsorption measurements (see **Note S1**). The difference in void space for each electrode may arise from intrinsic parameters of the carbon materials such as skeletal structure and density. The hierarchy of pore sizes is likely important for the transport of redox species in and out of the porous carbon during charge/discharge cycles. During charging, I⁻ moves through void space, to mesopores, and into the micropores which hold the polyiodide charged products. **Figure 2c** shows a cumulative pore-volume curve for each carbon that combines the void space data with the pore volumes determined by N₂ adsorption.

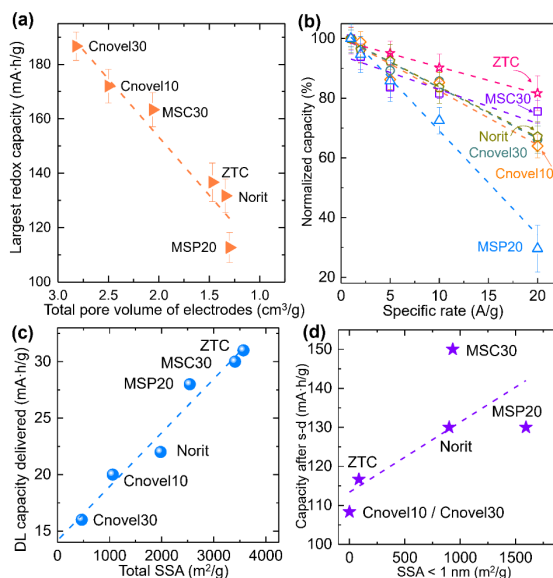


Figure 3. Correlation between pore properties and electrochemical response. (a) The total pore volume of different carbons as electrodes and corresponding specific redox capacity (double-layer capacity contribution subtracted) delivered at 1 A/g. (b) Rate-dependent capacity of porous carbons as positive electrodes cycled (in order) at 20 A/g, 10 A/g, 5 A/g, and 2 A/g, normalized to capacity at 1 A/g. (c) The total specific surface area for different carbons and corresponding double-layer capacity. (d) The specific surface area contributed from pores ≤ 1 nm for different carbons and discharge capacity retained after self-discharge test. All electrode mass were normalized to the dry mass of positive electrode.

Redox capacity and high-rate performance. To compare the electrochemical properties, including redox kinetics and rate capability, between various carbon electrodes, we used a three-electrode configuration with 3 M KI as the redox electrolyte and multiple separators (see details in SI, Figure S6). Uncompensated series resistance was corrected for such that each sample was charged to the same electrode potential (0.5 V vs. Ag/AgCl) at various charging rates (20 A/g, 10 A/g, 5 A/g, 2 A/g, and 1 A/g) when performing galvanostatic charge/discharge (GCD) cycling (Figure S9). The equivalent series resistance (ESR) of each electrode was determined from the iR potential drop between the charge and discharge steps. The cell-level capacity of a redox EC from GCD cycling includes both DL and faradaic contributions. To investigate how the pore structure impacts the faradaic processes, the DL contribution was subtracted. To estimate the electrode DL capacity (Note S2), voltammetry was swept at potentials where no faradaic reactions are present (Figure S7). We found that the DL capacity was proportional to the specific surface area of the carbon (Figure 3c). However, the trend line for DL capacity did not pass through the origin. It is

possible that there are other pseudocapacitive contributions due to surface species on the carbons whose contribution is independent of surface area.

After subtraction of the DL capacity, the remaining redox capacity found for each carbon correlates with the total electrode pore volume (**Figure 3a**) including void space (orange line). This observation shows that the void space and pore volume limit the faradaic capacity at relevant rates (1 A/g). The mesoporous carbon, Cnovel30, had the largest pore volume and large void space and thus exhibits the highest capacity at a given rate.

The delivered redox capacity for each carbon is shown as a function of rate in **Figure 3b**, normalized to the capacity at 1 A/g. The normalized loss in capacity as the rate is increased provides a measure of the ease of redox-couple transport in the porous carbon. The normalized-capacity loss with increasing rate decreased in the order of MSP20 > Cnovel10 \approx Cnovel30 > Norit > MSC30 > ZTC. Among the three activated carbons, the trend in normalized-capacity loss correlates with the pore sizes (**Figure 2b**). ZTC, with a micropore size of 1.2 nm, exhibits the least capacity loss at high rates, while MSP20, with the smallest pore sizes, exhibits the most. Micropores larger than 1 nm appear important for fast rate capability. Even though both MSC30 and Norit contain pores larger than ZTC, they also contain substantial ultra-narrow pores (< 0.8 nm), which likely lead to the inferior rate capability compared to ZTC with well-controlled 1.2 nm pores. Cnovel10 and Cnovel30 have larger mesopore volumes and void spaces, therefore requiring longer diffusion pathways for redox species, explaining the large loss of normalized capacity for these carbons at high rates compared to ZTC or MSC30. Although Cnovel30 and Cnovel10 deliver the largest redox capacity at slow rates due to the largest electrode pore volume, at 20 A/g, the capacities exhibited by microporous carbons MSC30 and ZTC are superior (**Figure S7**).

An interesting comparison is between the MSP20 and Norit carbon. MSP20 has a larger surface area (2540 m²/g) than Norit (1980 m²/g), but MSP20 has lower capacity and the largest performance loss as the rate increases. This behavior is likely explained by the fact that MSP20 has primarily pores less than 1 nm in diameter. The small pores make retard iodide species diffusion inside the pores at high rate. The redox capacity at 20 A/g for MSP20 was almost four times less than MSC30 and Cnovel30 (**Figure S10**). Norit carbon, which contains micropores larger than 1.1 nm that contribute to \sim 55% of the surface area (**Table S1**), provides improved mass transport of the redox species compared to MSP20. This finding shows that high surface area alone

is insufficient for designing carbons in redox ECs and suggests that hierarchical pore structures are critical.

Self-discharge. The carbon-pore structure also substantially influenced the rate of self-discharge. Self-discharge was quantified by measuring the capacity retention after holding a cell charged at 1 A/g for 6 h at open circuit, compared to when it was first charged (1 mA·h) (**Figure 3d**). The cell with MSC30 retained ~90% of its capacity, while those with mesoporous carbons, Cnovel10 or Cnovel30, retained only ~65% of the capacity. This result indicates faster self-discharge due to diffusion of the charged redox species from positive to negative electrode for the mesoporous carbons. Further, while ZTC outperformed the Norit and MSP20 carbons with respect to capacity, it exhibited worse self-discharge with only 70% capacity retention after 6 h at open circuit. As ZTC possesses the highest surface area of the carbon materials investigated, it is clear several other factors are important to retard cross diffusion. ZTC has a narrow pore-size distribution centered at 1.2 nm. These pores appear to be slightly too large to effectively confine the charged products and prevent self-discharge. **Figure 3d** and **Table S1** show that the surface area provided by pores smaller than 1 nm appear important to inhibit self-discharge by containing and trapping charged triiodide species. The three microporous carbons, MSC30, Norit and MSP20, all contain a substantial fraction of pores < 1 nm yielding a slower self-discharge rate than the carbons without these < 1 nm pores (Cnovel10, Cnovel30 and ZTC).

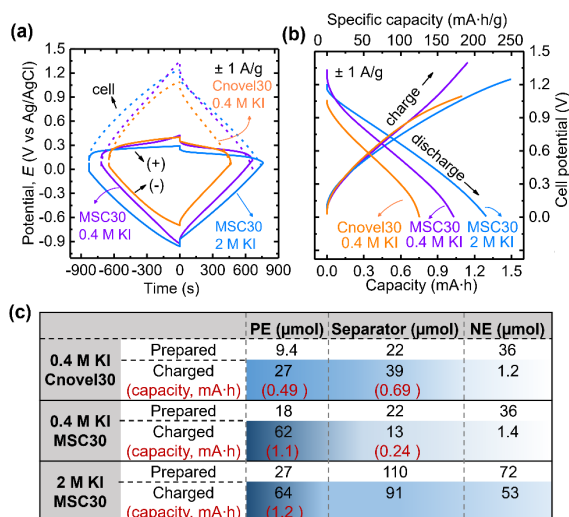


Figure 4. Quantification redox species distribution in the cell and relation to performance. (a) The galvanostatic charge/discharge profiles for the positive, negative, and total three-electrode cell cycled at 1 A/g (normalized to the mass of the positive electrode only). The cells were assembled with two different activated carbons (MSC30 and

Cnovel30) as positive electrodes and different concentrations of KI as redox electrolyte: 0.4 M KI with Cnovel30 (orange), 0.4 M KI with MSC30 (purple), and 2 M KI with MSC30 (blue), respectively. (b) Galvanostatic charge-discharge (GCD) profiles for two-electrode cells. (c) Table showing the quantity of iodide in the positive electrode (PE), separator, and negative electrode (NE) of as-prepared and charged cells. The capacity numbers represent the estimated redox capacity contribution from amount of iodide found. See more details in **Note S3**.

Quantification of redox species location. Asymmetric cells were designed and built with aqueous KI (0.4 M and 2 M) as the electrolyte to quantitatively analyze the distribution and redistribution of the redox species during charge and discharge process (see SI for details). A two-electrode configuration was used with an oversized negative electrode (five times larger in mass than the positive electrode) on which charge storage was only via DL formation. Two very different porous carbons were chosen as positive electrodes: one microporous carbon, MSC30, with a SSA of $\sim 3410 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ and pore size of 1.1 - 3 nm and the other, a mesoporous carbon, Cnovel30, with a lower surface area of $\sim 470 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}$ but with a much larger average pore size of 20 - 30 nm.

The assembled cells were filled with 0.4 M KI as an electrolyte and cycled at $\pm 1 \text{ A/g}$ to $1.1 \text{ mA}\cdot\text{h}$ (**Figure 4a, 4b**). The low KI concentration was chosen to achieve total consumption of the iodide, which is evidenced by electrochemical behavior that transitions from redox-like (i.e., potential is relatively flat with charge) to capacitive (where potential changes linearly with charge at the longer times). We then measured how the charged species redistribute during the subsequent discharge process. A glass-fiber (GF) separator was inserted to prevent direct electrical contact between the electrodes, but no ion-selective membrane was used and the dissolved iodide/triiodide could freely transfer through the cell (i.e. between the positive and negative electrode). Subsequently, the electrodes and GF separator for an as-prepared and fully-charged cell were dissolved individually. The dissolution of electrode was challenging as carbon electrode material used is not soluble in common acids. Graphitic carbon is often burned in a furnace and the resulting ash is dissolved for analysis. However, such a dry-ashing approach would lead to a loss of the volatile iodine species. We dissolved the electrodes in a mixture of heated perchloric acid and nitric acid (**Figure S8**).³⁴ Inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry (ICP-AES) was used to measure the iodine content in the dissolved components (**Figure 4c**).

In both cells, Cnovel30 with 0.4 M KI and MSC30 with 0.4 M KI, the iodide which was originally adsorbed onto the negative electrode was nearly completely removed after charging (only $\sim 3\%$ left, **Figure 4c**). Cnovel30 confines substantially less triiodide ($27 \mu\text{mol}$, 4.5 mmol/g)

within the positive electrode than MSC30 (62 μmol , 10.3 mmol/g) when charged in the 0.4 M KI solution. The Cnovel30 cell also delivered less capacity (0.75 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h}$, 125 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h/g}$) than MSC30 (1.03 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h}$, 172 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h/g}$), even if both were equally charged (1.1 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h}$, 183 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h/g}$) (**Figure 4b**). These results are consistent with fast self-discharge for the carbons with large pores that cannot effectively confine and adsorb the polyiodides formed.

We next studied a higher concentration electrolyte (2 M KI) and found that the iodide is not depleted over the whole cell during charging. Interestingly, with MSC30 as the working electrode, substantially higher capacity (1.3 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h}$, 217 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h/g}$) relative to 0.4 M KI (1.03 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h}$, 172 $\text{mA}\cdot\text{h/g}$; **Figure 4b**) was not found. A decrease in coulombic efficiency, however, from 91% for 0.4 M KI to 86% for 2 M KI was observed in one ~ 30 -min GCD cycle. Correlating the fact (**Figure 4c**) that the carbon was not able to confine significantly more iodide for 2 M KI (64 μmol) than for 0.4 M KI (62 μmol), the extra charged triiodide diffused into the “bulk” solution, contributing to self-discharge. Hence, we conclude that it is rather the quantity of active species that a carbon electrode can confine in the charged state that is important for capacity, instead of only the overall amount of redox species in the electrolyte. This finding also emphasizes the importance of choosing the appropriate hierarchically porous carbon.

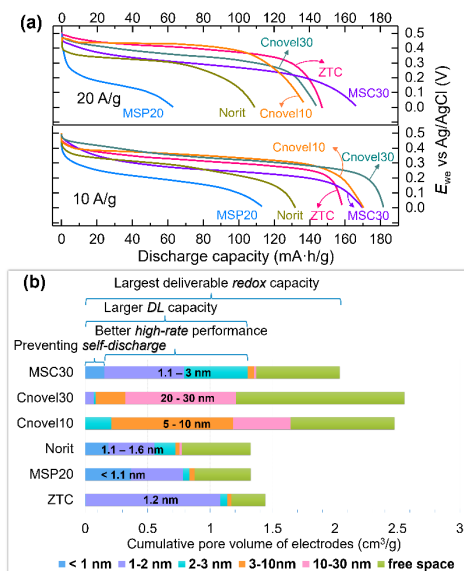


Figure 5. Design principles for porous carbon electrodes. (a) The discharge curves of different carbons as positive electrodes at high rates (20 A/g and 10 A/g, normalized to the dry mass of positive electrode) showing overall capacity (redox plus DL contribution). (b) The pore volume contributed from various pore size regions for different carbons as electrodes (normalized to the mass of electrodes).

Design principles. The overall rate performance of a redox EC is governed by both the faradaic and DL capacity, with the DL component increasing in importance at high rate. MSC30 yielded the highest capacity of all carbons at a rate of 20 A/g (**Figure 5a**), while maintaining excellent self-discharge performance. At 10 A/g, MSC30 provided the second highest capacity. Choosing the appropriate carbon is clearly critical for redox EC technology. For example, comparing MSP20 and MSC30, the latter provides a four times more redox capacity (and three times overall capacity improvement) at a rate of 20 A/g, while decreasing self-discharge (capacity retention of > 90%, versus < 80% after 6 h). These dramatic differences were unexpected when simply comparing the SSA (3410 m²/g versus 2540 m²/g).

We next compare MSP20 and ZTC to illustrate the general features of redox EC carbon design principles. MSP20, with primary pores < 1.1 nm, yielded the worst redox rate performance (which we conclude is due to mass transport limitations in the small pores) but has slow self-discharge. ZTC, which has a larger more-uniform pore size of 1.2 nm, delivered better redox performance, but with worse self-discharge. Therefore, we propose that, when utilizing halides as redox species, a superior carbon electrode should have (**Figure 5b**): (1) pores smaller than 1 nm, which are essential for effectively preventing self-discharge and contribute DL capacity that is increasingly important at high rates; (2) micropores larger than ~1 nm to provide pathways for electrolyte transport and correspondingly better high-rate capability for faradaic processes; (3) a large pore volume contributed by meso/micropores of the carbon, with an addition of void space that provide a reservoir of electrolyte in close proximity to the porous carbon, to achieve a high redox capacity. These design criteria reveal activated carbons like MSC30, with multiple pore structures containing ultra-narrow pores of < 0.8 nm (for slow self-discharge) and larger pores of 1.1 - 3 nm (for high-rate capability), as well as a modest contribution of void space in the electrode, provide the highest performance. Better engineering of the void space would likely lead to further improvements.

In summary, we related the pore structure of a variety of porous carbon materials to operational mechanisms and performance when applied as electrodes in redox-enhanced capacitors. This work provides a fundamental analysis of how to identify carbons with the best performance and optimize a specific carbon for redox EC. Although MSC30 appears promising in this study, the absolute pore sizes forming the basis for this analysis are probably not universal for all redox species, considering that the intrinsic ion size of each species influences the interactions

within nanoporous confinement. Therefore, the experimental protocols and results herein should serve as guidelines that, when also combined with knowledge of the size of the redox species and its solubility and interaction with carbon, enable the rational design of carbon electrodes for redox ECs.

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