Relating voltage and thermal safety in Li-ion battery cathodes: a high-throughput computational study†

Anubhav Jain,‡ Geoffroy Hautier,§ Shyue Ping Ong,¶ Stephen Dacek and Gerbrand Ceder*

High voltage and high thermal safety are desirable characteristics of cathode materials, but difficult to achieve simultaneously. This work uses high-throughput density functional theory computations to evaluate the link between voltage and safety (as estimated by thermodynamic O2 release temperatures) for over 1400 cathode materials. Our study indicates that a strong inverse relationship exists between voltage and safety: just over half the variance in O2 release temperature can be explained by voltage alone. We examine the effect of polyanion group, redox couple, and ratio of oxygen to counter-cation on both voltage and safety. As expected, our data demonstrates that polyanion groups improve safety when comparing compounds with similar voltages. However, a counterintuitive result of our study is that polyanion groups produce either no benefit or reduce safety when comparing compounds with the same redox couple. Using our data set, we tabulate voltages and oxidation potentials for over 105 combinations of redox couple/anion, which can be used towards the design and rationalization of new cathode materials. Overall, only a few compounds in our study, representing limited redox couple/polyanion combinations, exhibit both high voltage and high safety. We discuss these compounds in more detail as well as the opportunities for designing safe, high-voltage cathodes.

Introduction

Voltage and thermal safety are important design considerations for Li ion battery cathode chemistries. A high voltage improves energy density and power delivered by the battery; however, high voltage cathodes must also maintain safe operation of the cell. Indeed, a history of fires,1 from laptops to cars to aboard a ‘Dreamliner’ aircraft,2 has renewed focus towards designing safer Li ion batteries.3,4

While many components of a battery are responsible for the overall thermal safety of a battery (henceforth referred to simply as safety), a cathode material’s safety is generally assessed as its resistance to releasing O2 at elevated temperatures in its charged state. Released oxygen can combust the organic electrolyte and eventually lead to thermal runaway of the cell and fire.5,6

To design the next generation of safe, high-voltage cathodes, the research community has typically targeted polyanion chemistries.7,8 Polyanion-based cathodes, which include phosphates, silicates, borates, and sulfates, are known to exhibit higher voltages through the inductive effect.9,10 Polyanions are also thought to guard against O2 release by embedding the oxygen atoms within a polyanion group such as PO4 or SiO4 that is speculated to be difficult to disrupt.11–14 The well-known LiFePO4 material is one example of a polyanion-based cathode that exhibits a fairly high voltage (3.5 V) while also possessing good safety characteristics.15,16 However, it has now been demonstrated that not all phosphates are resistant to O2 release; for example, charged LiCoPO4 (4.5 V) readily releases O2 even at low temperatures.17

In distinguishing safe and unsafe cathodes, previous work by Godshall et al. has indicated that high voltage cathodes are more prone to O2 release.18 They report that the equilibrium oxygen pressure of a cathode is independent of chemistry and increases linearly with voltage.18 However, there exist three major limitations with this study. The first is that voltages were measured at equilibrium, which pertains only to conversion cathodes. Nearly all commercially relevant rechargeable batteries are based on insertion cathodes, which is the subject of our study.

Department of Materials Science & Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02139, USA. E-mail: gceder@mit.edu; Tel: +1-617-253-1581
† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: 10.1039/c5cp00250h
‡ Present address: Environmental Energy & Technologies Division, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, Berkeley, California, 94720, USA.
§ Present address: Institute of Condensed Matter and Nanosciences, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.
¶ Present address: Department of Nanoengineering, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, California 92093, USA.

Received 15th January 2015, Accepted 20th January 2015
DOI: 10.1039/c5cp00250h
www.rsc.org/pccp

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Second, the data pre-dates most investigations of polyanion-based cathodes and is reported only for three similar Li metal oxide systems. Finally, measurements were only performed at very low voltages (<1.81 V) due to electrolyte limitations of the time. Recently, Huggins has re-examined the same data set to extrapolate their linear relation to higher voltages and ambient temperatures, finding that cathodes higher than 3 V should become prone to O2 release. However, like the earlier study, the data used to make this claim is limited only to three lithium transition metal oxide conversion systems at very low voltages. Therefore, the broad claim that chemistry does not affect the relation between voltage and oxygen pressure merits further investigation using an expanded test set that includes polyanion systems and uses insertion voltages that are more representative of today’s battery materials.

In previous works, we have introduced computational methods for evaluating both voltage and oxidation potential based on density functional theory (DFT) calculations. The voltage is computed for Li insertion (out-of-equilibrium behavior) and closely matches experimental values. The oxidation potential is determined by computing phase stability diagrams analogously to the experimental approach of Godshall et al. A major advantage of the computational approach is that it can rapidly characterize diverse chemical systems within a high-throughput framework, allowing us to assess statistical trends in safety over a variety of oxides and polyanions.

Using such computations, we previously reported the thermal instability of charged LiMnPO4 cathodes compared to charged LiFePO4, which matched trends that were measured experimentally. In addition, by producing data for hundreds of phosphate chemistries, we observed that phosphates on average have a lower oxidation potential (and thereby higher intrinsic safety) than oxides at the same voltage. However, we also observed that phosphate groups certainly do not guarantee safety, especially at high voltage. In particular, while phosphate safety is often attributed to the difficulty of breaking P–O bonds, we observed that O2 release can still readily occur by converting PO4 groups to P2O7 groups.

This work uses high-throughput computation to systematically investigate the effect of redox metal and polyanion group on the voltage and oxidation potential of many types of battery cathodes, including oxides, borates, silicates, phosphates, and sulfates. We report the relationship between voltage and oxidation potential and the effect of chemistry in determining voltage and oxidation potential. Finally, we assess the prospects for designing intrinsically safe, high-voltage cathodes.

Methods

Data set
The chemical compounds investigated in this work are ternary and quaternary systems containing Li, one redox-active metal, oxygen, and optionally one of {B, Si, P, S}. We restricted our data to one-electron-or-less redox processes of the metals {Ti, V, Cr, Fe, Mn, Co, Ni, Cu, Mo}. The compounds originated in either the 2006 Inorganic Crystal Structure Database (ICSD) or were predicted compounds based on data-mined algorithms.

We excluded compounds with large thermodynamic driving forces for decomposition to other phases, as determined by phase stability diagrams. In particular, this procedure excludes predicted compounds that our computations indicate have a low likelihood for successful synthesis. These phase stability diagrams incorporate calculations on most compounds from the 2006 ICSD containing four elements or less. We removed from analysis any cathode material that exhibited over 50 mV per atom instability in the discharged state or over 150 mV per atom instability in the charged state.

The stability filtering procedure reduced 1936 computed compounds to 1409 cathodes used in this study. The number of cathodes for each redox couple/anion pair are plotted in Fig. 1. In general, the ICSD combined with our structure prediction algorithms produce several stable insertion compounds across the entire chemical space. However, several chemistries have few or no compounds. These missing chemistries include Cr4+/5+, Cu5+6+, Mo5+/6+ and Cu1/2 for most polyanions and some redox/polyanion combinations such as Mn3/4 silicates and Ni3/4 in silicates and borates. In most cases, the lack of data in these chemical systems is caused by few attempted calculations. However, in some cases (such as Ni3/4 borates, Ni3/4 silicates, and Mn3/4 silicates), several calculations were attempted but we were unable to find many stable compounds. The difference between the number of attempted computations and the number of stable compounds is plotted in the ESI, Fig. S1.

DFT computation parameters

The complete details of our high-throughput computational methodology are provided in prior publications; we summarize
them here. Our computations were performed using the VASP software \cite{VASP} and employed the GGA functional as parameterized by Perdew, Burke, and Ernzerhof.\cite{Perdew,Burke} To correct self-interaction for compounds containing (Cr, Cu, Co, Fe, Mn, Mo, Ni, V), we used the rotationally invariant approach to GGA + U proposed by Dudarev et al.\cite{Dudarev} and fitted the correction using the method of Wang et al.\cite{Wang} The only exception is the +U for Co (set at 5.7 eV) following Zhou et al.\cite{Zhou} When constructing phase diagrams, we used the strategy reported by Jain et al.\cite{Jain} to combine data from GGA and GGA + U calculated energies. The pseudopotentials and DFT + U parameters employed in this work are tabulated in the ESI,\dagger Table S1.

We initialized all magnetic ions ferromagnetically with high-spin, with the exception of Co-containing compounds which were computed with both high and low spin initializations (with the lowest energy result retained). Additionally, some binary oxides used in phase diagram analysis were computed in their known antiferromagnetic state. We employed an electronic energy convergence cutoff of $n \times 5 \times 10^{-5}$ eV and an ionic convergence cutoff of $n \times 5 \times 10^{-4}$ eV along with a 500/$n$ k-point mesh, where $n$ represents the number of atoms in the unit cell.\cite{Dudarev} Each compound was structurally optimized twice in two consecutive runs using the AFLLOW software package.\cite{AFLOW}

The voltage of a cathode often depends on its state of charge. In most cases, our voltage data represents an average between fully charged and fully discharged states. For multi-electron cathodes, the data is reported separately for each redox couple of the transition metal. However, voltage changes due solely to Li ion ordering effects are not considered. Compounds with partial occupancy of an element on a site were ordered based on reasonable supercell size considerations (generally $<$100 atoms) and lowest electrostatic energy.\cite{Okada,Sharma}

The energies of SO$_2$ and SO$_3$ gas at room temperature were fit using known experimental reaction energies\cite{Hartree,Fawcett} using the method of Wang et al.\cite{Wang} The resulting fit over a variety of sulfate reactions are presented in the ESI,\dagger Fig. S2 and S3. However, the behavior of these gases was not modeled as a function of temperature.

We note that it can be difficult to assess the accuracy of computational models. As a guide, and based on a past study of 135 computed reaction energies versus experiment using these methods, we expect the standard deviation of error of most computed reaction energies used in constructing phase diagrams to be centered at zero with a standard deviation of approximately 24 meV per atom.\cite{Burke} For portions of the phase diagram involving mixing delocalized compounds with transition metal compounds, we expect the accuracy of the GGA/GGA + U mixing strategy to have a mean absolute error of about 45 meV per atom.\cite{Jain} The expected mean absolute error in voltage calculations (involving redox processes) is approximately 0.2 volts.\cite{Zhou}

**Method for computing oxygen release temperature**

To compute an oxygen release temperature, we employ a method introduced in prior publications for calculating the equilibrium oxidation potential ($\mu_O$) of compounds as implemented in the pymatgen materials analysis library.\cite{pymatgen} This method determines $\mu_O$ by computing phase stability diagrams,\cite{Stichl,Coe} which indicate the thermodynamically favorable decomposition reaction for O$_2$ release as well the energy of this reaction for all points in composition space.

By computing $\mu_O$, we can determine the thermodynamically-driven onset temperature of O$_2$ gas release. If the chemical potential of oxygen in the environment ($\mu_O^{env}$) is lowered below our computed value of $\mu_O$ for the cathode, there exists a thermodynamic driving force for the system to release oxygen gas by converting to new phases. The external oxygen chemical potential ($\mu_O^{env}$) can be modeled to vary according to temperature and pressure according to the following relation:\cite{Stichl}

$$\mu_O^{env}(T,p_{O_2}) = H_{O_2}^0 - T S_{O_2}^{T,p_0} + k T \ln \frac{p_{O_2}}{p_0}$$

in which $H_{O_2}^0$ corresponds to the O$_2$ energy at ambient conditions, $S_{O_2}^{T,p_0}$ represents the entropy of oxygen gas, and $p_{O_2}$ is the ratio of the partial pressure of oxygen gas to that under standard conditions. $H_{O_2}^0$ is set to the numerical O$_2$ energy reported in the previous work of Wang et al. that corrects for both binding energy and electronic environment errors.\cite{Wang} We note that $H_{O_2}^0$ also includes the PV term of an ideal gas at ambient conditions. The entropy of oxygen gas as a function of temperature, $S_{O_2}^{T,p_0}$, is taken from experimental data in the NIST Chemistry Webbook.\cite{NIST} Eqn (1) allows us to convert our computed $\mu_O$ to a thermodynamic onset temperature of O$_2$ release, assuming that the major temperature dependence comes from O$_2$ gas entropy alone and not due to temperature-dependent differences in solid phase free energies.

**Comparison of method with experiment and limitations**

To assess the relevance of our computed thermodynamic onset temperature as an indicator of cathode safety, we plot in Fig. 2 the relationship between our computed onset temperature and experimentally measured O$_2$ release onset temperatures for several cathode materials (the raw data is in ESI,\dagger Table S2).\cite{Stichl,Coe} The relationship between our computed temperature and measured experimental data qualitatively distinguishes the different materials classes (particularly within air or reducing gas environments). It is important to note that the $p_{O_2}$ used for the computational prediction is standard conditions (i.e. the fit in Wang et al.\cite{Wang}) Quantitative agreement with experiment should not be expected as the experimental $p_{O_2}$ is generally not specified or even controlled (e.g., testing in electrolyte or reducing gas, or for electrode materials containing carbon).

At the lowest end of safety are not the oxides but rather Ni and Co phosphate materials. Indeed, both of these materials are speculated to release O$_2$ at room temperature when fully delithiated.\cite{Okada} For partially delithiated LiCoPO$_4$, it is worth noting that a study by Okada et al.\cite{Okada} indicated an onset temperature of 200 °C for Li$_{0.2}$CoPO$_4$, but actually report a higher onset of 280 °C for Li$_{0.1}$CoPO$_4$ despite its lower Li content (inconsistent with our computed results and thermodynamic behavior).

Following the delithiated Co and Ni phosphates, the next lowest predicted safety is for charged layered oxides, followed by the
Mn spinel, MnSiO₃, and MnPO₄. The experiments are generally consistent with the computed data, with the possible exception of MnPO₄ for which there is considerable disagreement in experimental reports. Data from Chen et al.¹⁵ and Kim et al.¹⁶ indicate low thermal stability between 150–210 °C, whereas data from Martha et al.⁵⁷ and Choi et al.⁵⁸ indicate no O₂ release until at least 300 °C or 490 °C, respectively. Our computations are consistent with the former set of studies.

For compounds with computed O₂ release temperatures above 1000 °C, comparison with experiment becomes difficult because experiments generally do not test such high temperatures (for which there are other concerns than O₂ release). The discrepancy between measured experimental values can also be large; for example, the onset of measured O₂ release in FePO₄ in reducing environments ranges from approximately 220 °C⁵¹,⁵³ to over 400 °C.¹⁵ However, our computed data are consistent with a recent report that LiFeP₂O₇ demonstrates higher thermal stability than FePO₄.⁶⁶

While our computed O₂ onset temperature is a good general indicator of intrinsic safety, the measure is not expected to be quantitatively accurate. First, the experimental conditions in the different studies are nonuniform, and the reducing environments lower the O₂ onset temperature compared to predicted values at ambient O₂ pressure. Similarly, carbon coatings could further reduce the onset temperature of O₂ release compared to a theoretical value. In ESI, Table S2, we show the degree to which our model would predict different results under different partial pressures of oxygen. For example, a predicted onset of 500 °C at atmospheric pressure reduces to 264 °C at one-millionth of atmospheric pressure.

Residual Li or overcharging in some of the experiments could also alter O₂ onset. Synthesis method, particle size and shape also play a role in observed O₂ release temperature. Finally, interpreting experimental data is not always trivial, and disagreement in experimental reports can originate from whether observed peaks in differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) or dips in thermogravimetric analysis (TG) represent O₂ release or some other process such as H₂O liberation or structure transformation.⁵⁹ One advantage of the computational approach is that it provides a consistent and well-defined measurement of intrinsic safety.

Despite the qualitative agreement of our computations with experimental data, we mention several limitations of our approach. One limitation is that we only model equilibrium gas evolution; in practice, a compound might release O₂ while in a metastable structure. In some cases, the thermodynamic decomposition path may be very different from the one undertaken in practical operating conditions. In particular, this may be an issue for the compounds that are predicted to release O₂ at very low T. This possibility is more thoroughly discussed in previous publications.²²,²⁴ A consequence of modeling equilibrium decomposition (but non-equilibrium intercalation) is that we predict different polymorphs of the same composition to possess the same μO₂ but different voltages. One justification for this approach is that as temperature increases, metastability becomes less likely; therefore, voltage (relevant for room temperature operation of cells) can involve metastable structures whereas thermal runaway at higher temperatures is less likely to do so.

A second important limitation of our method is that we do not model mixed metal phases such as doped spinels⁶⁷ or mixed-metal layered compounds.⁵⁴ Our results pertain to mixed metal systems insofar as each metal acts independently of the other. For example, experimental work by Kim et al. on mixtures of Mn-Fe olivine materials indicates that decomposition temperatures for mixed systems lie intermediate to the pure metal endmembers.⁶⁸ In addition, recent computational work by Hajiyani et al. for the olivine system indicates that the critical oxidation potential for mixed metal compounds may lie in between the oxidation potentials of their single metal endmembers.⁶⁹

Finally, we are only evaluating the conditions at which onset of O₂ evolution from the bulk is expected to occur. We do not model the actual heating rate of the cell due to reaction with the electrolyte, nor do we consider the amount of O₂ evolved. In this respect, our measure is more analogous to TG experiments than DSC experiments.

**Results**

**Voltage versus safety**

Now that we have established our computational procedure, we report the data for oxidation potentials of 1409 cathode materials representing oxide, borate, silicate, phosphate, and sulfate families (Fig. 3).
The data in Fig. 3 indicates an inverse relationship between voltage and O$_2$ release temperature, consistent with the previous result from Godshall et al. that high voltage cathodes also tend to be less safe. However, we observe considerable scatter in the relation. Excluding points at 0 K in the “kinetic” region, the $R^2$ value for a linear least-squares fit to the data is 0.53, indicating that almost half of the variance in the O$_2$ release temperature within our data set can be explained by voltage alone. The other ~47% of variance is due to other factors. Nevertheless, the correlation illustrates the challenge in designing safe, high-voltage cathodes; as one metric is improved, the other tends to deteriorate.

We note two borate outliers in Fig. 3: at 4.95 V and 2476 °C is LiV(B$_3$O$_5$)$_3$ and at 5.34 V and 1182 °C is LiFe(B$_3$O$_5$)$_3$. It is possible that compounds with a (B$_3$O$_5$)$_3$ polyanion group are not accurately modeled by our phase diagrams or by GGA, but we found no reason to exclude these compounds from the study. It should be noted, however, that they have very low maximum theoretical capacity (<70 mA h g$^{-1}$). The sulfate outlier at 5.07 V and 1207 °C is LiV(SO$_4$)$_2$. This compound is not the most stable polymorph and is discussed further later in the text.

While all polyanion chemistries generally exhibit poorer safety with increasing voltage, some polyanions are safer (achieve higher O$_2$ release temperatures) at a given voltage. For example, the sulfates (yellow) exhibit higher O$_2$ release temperatures compared to the oxides (orange). To better visualize the difference in voltage versus O$_2$ release temperature for each polyanion, we separately fit a linear least-squares relation per chemistry and plot the results in Fig. 4. Fig. 4 illustrates that, at a given voltage, safety tends to increase in the order: oxides < silicates < borates ~ phosphates < sulfates.

Surprisingly, none of the commercial cathodes labeled in Fig. 4 demonstrate extraordinary safety given their voltage and polyanion chemistry. FePO$_4$ is only slightly safer than the fitted average for 3.5 V phosphates; Li$_{0.5}$CoO$_2$ is approximately as safe as the fitted average for 3.9 V oxides; CoO$_2$ and Mn$_2$O$_4$ are less safe than their fitted averages for oxides. As discussed in later sections, this might be because the compounds that display higher safety at a given voltage often also compromise capacity, which would reduce their commercial viability. The slightly different slopes for the various chemistries can be attributed to the different types of phase diagrams for each chemical system, and in particular the typical reactions leading to O$_2$ release in each system.$^{70}$

**Effect of redox couple and polyanion type**

The type of polyanion group is not the only chemical factor affecting safety. An additional factor determining $\mu_{O_2}$ is the element and valence state employed for the redox metal.$^{29}$ Therefore, we also examine the data in finer detail by plotting the mean voltage and O$_2$ release temperature for each combination of redox couple/anion type (Fig. 5).

The left panel of Fig. 5 clearly demonstrates the inductive effect; for a given redox couple, voltage increases upon addition of a polyanion group. In addition, polyanions with a highly electronegative cation such as phosphorus and sulfur exhibit the greatest shift in voltage from the oxides, as expected from previous studies.$^9$ However, the high voltage systems in the left panel of Fig. 5 tend to exhibit the lowest O$_2$ release temperatures on the right panel (Fig. 5), echoing our results presented in Fig. 3.

The right panel of Fig. 5 demonstrates that the addition of polyanions can actually lower O$_2$ release temperatures compared to oxides, making them less safe than the oxides at the same redox couple. The effect is moderate for borates and silicates, but is pronounced for phosphates. The sulfates are computed to be safer than the oxides at low temperatures, but much less safe at high temperatures. It should be repeated, however, that we do not consider the entropic effect of SO$_2$ and SO$_3$ gases at high temperature. Our finding that the addition of polyanion group
for a fixed redox couple offers no improvement or deteriorates safety is surprising given that polyanions are typically promoted as a route towards high safety. However, it is consistent with our previous computational data and some experimental data suggesting that Mn and Co in phosphates is less safe than in oxides, although safety data for Mn and Co phosphates is currently still under discussion.

From Fig. 4 and 5, we therefore arrive at two statements regarding the effect of polyanions. At a given voltage, polyanions tend to be safer than oxides. However (and counterintuitively), for a given redox couple, polyanions exhibit comparable or poorer safety compared to oxides.

Effect of O/X ratio within polyanion type

Next, we examine whether condensed polyanions (such as PO₃ or P₂O₇) might offer better safety at higher voltage compared to polyanions with more oxygen content (such as PO₄ or OPO₄). Padhi et al. have theorized that, neglecting electrostatic factors, condensed phosphates might offer higher inductive effect (and therefore higher voltage) due to shorter P–O bonds that more heavily influence the Fe–O covalency. Indeed, we previously reported that shorter bond lengths and lower O/P ratios resulted in higher voltages in phosphates. Recent work by Tamaru et al. also reports the condensed phosphate LiFeP₂O₇ to be more thermally stable than FePO₄ at a similarly high voltage of 3.52 V (P₂₁/c structure). The Mn analogue LiMnP₂O₇ also exhibits high voltage and safety, although Li could not be fully extracted from this material and thermal stability was not as high as in LiFeP₂O₇. Similar results were also obtained for NaFeP₂O₇. These studies encourage us to investigate whether our data also suggests that lower O/X ratios might simultaneously raise voltage and thermal stability.

In Fig. 6, we plot Z-scores of voltage and O₂ release temperature as a function of O/X ratio. For each compound, the Z-score relates either voltage or safety to that of other compounds with the same redox couple and polyanion counter cation:

\[ Z_i = \frac{P_i - \mu_{R,X}}{\sigma_X} \]

Here, \( P_i \) is the property of interest for compound \( i \) (either voltage or O₂ release temperature), \( \mu_{R,X} \) is the average value of that property for all compounds with the same redox couple and polyanion counter cation, and \( \sigma_X \) is the standard deviation of the property value for all compounds with the same polyanion counter cation. A Z-score of 1 for \( P = \) voltage thereby indicates that a compound is one standard deviation higher in voltage than compounds with the same redox couple and polyanion element.

We summarize the results of Fig. 6 by polyanion counter element. For borates (blue), the trend is different for O/B ratio...
less than 3 versus for O/B ratio greater than 3. When decreasing
the O/B ratio below 3, the voltage increases and thermal
stability decreases: the slope and $R^2$ for a linear least-squares
fit to voltage are $-0.90$ and $0.53$, respectively. This indicates
that condensing beyond $BO_3$ greatly increases voltage $Z$-score.
The effect on thermal stability is smaller: a linear least-squares
fit to the safety data for O/B $< 3$ produces a slope of $0.29$ and
$R^2$ of $0.21$. Finally, when increasing the amount of oxygen
(O/B $> 3$), the effect is small: $R^2$ values for both voltage and
safety are less than $0.04$.

In silicates, we find no evidence that O/Si ratio alone
influences properties; a linear least-squares fit produces slopes
of less than $0.1$ and $R^2$ values of less than $0.03$ for both voltage
and $O_2$ release temperature.

In phosphates, we find that condensed groups (lower O/P
ratios) exhibit higher voltages but do not affect $O_2$ release
temperatures on average. A linear least-squares fit to the data
produces a slope of $-0.55$ and $R^2$ value of $0.21$ for voltage, but a
slope of less than $0.02$ and $R^2$ value less than $0.001$ for $O_2$
release temperature. Therefore, condensed phosphates on average
provide higher voltages without compromising thermal
stability, in support of the experimental and computational
results reported by Tamaru et al. for the specific case of
LiMPO$_4$ ($M = Fe, Mn$) compounds.$^{66}$ Unfortunately, this higher
voltage at a given safety generally comes at the cost of lower
capacity (see Discussion).

Compounds exhibiting high voltage and low intrinsic $\mu_{O_2}$
In addition to examining general trends in voltage versus $O_2$
release temperature, we examine specific compounds that
might possess both high voltage and high intrinsic safety. In
Table 1, we list the most stable polymorphs of compounds in
our data set that exhibit a voltage greater than $3.2$ V, a capacity
greater than $100$ mA h g$^{-1}$, and have a computed $O_2$ release
temperature over $1000$ °C, corresponding to thermal stability
intermediate to Mn$_2$O$_4$ and FePO$_4$.

Many of compounds in Table 1 have been previously synthe-
sized and electrochemically tested, such as LiVO$_2$, $^{73-75}$ LiFeBO$_3$, $^{76}$
LiFePO$_4$ (we note the $P2_1/c$ polymorph$^{66}$ is present in our study,
but not the most stable polymorph$^{71}$ LiFePO$_4$, $^{10}$ Li$_2$FeSiO$_4$, $^{77}$ and
Li$_2$Fe$_4$(SO$_4$)$_3$.$^{78}$ For LiFeSiO$_4$, the computed voltage for the Fe$^{2+/3}$
couple ($3.28$ V) is close to reported experimental data ($\sim 3.1$ V)$^{77}$
Our calculations indicate that this material should be quite
thermally stable as long as the redox couple is restricted to Fe$^{2+/3}$.
However, our calculations also indicate that completely charged
FeSiO$_4$ (Fe$^{4+}$) would possess very low thermal stability and might
only be stabilized by kinetic effects. Indeed, fully charged FeSiO$_4$
(which to our knowledge has not been observed) was filtered from
our data set due to its high thermodynamic driving force for decomposition to a mixture of FeO, SiO2, and O2 under ambient conditions. While we know of no experimental thermal stability data on LiFeSiO4, experiments have demonstrated that at extreme voltages of 4.7 V (the Fe3+/4 couple) this material is thermally stable until approximately 185 °C. \(^{61}\)

Three new compounds in the list are potentially interesting as one-electron materials with energy density comparable to LiFePO4. The most stable polymorph of LiVB2O4 (id #136521) is predicted to exhibit a voltage of 3.48 V and has a theoretical capacity of 168 mAh g\(^{-1}\) similar to LiFePO4. However, both the thermodynamic stability and thermal safety are predicted to be lower than LiFePO4. The LiCuSO4 system (id #135045) is also similar to LiFePO4 in predicted voltage (3.57 V) and capacity (161 mAh g\(^{-1}\)). It operates on the unconventional Cu\(^{1+}/2\) redox couple, but is predicted to be reasonably stable from a thermodynamic standpoint and exceeds the predicted thermal safety of LiFePO4. Potential issues with Cu\(^{1+}\)-containing systems are
very different preferred local environments for Cu$^{1+}$ and Cu$^{2+}$ ions as well as potential mobility of Cu$^{1+}$. However, we note that LiCuPO$_4$ was recently synthesized and electrochemically tested with partial reversibility by Snyder et al., thereby encouraging future investigations of Cu$^{1/2}$ in chemistries such as sulfates. Finally, LiVSiO$_4$ (id #58385) maintains roughly the same energy density as the previous two candidates with a slightly lower voltage (3.26 V) and higher capacity (179 mA h g$^{-1}$). This material is predicted to possess extremely high thermal safety (better than LiFePO$_4$). However, it has a large driving force for thermodynamic decomposition in the charged state (116 meV per atom).

If we expand our search to potential two-electron redox couples by examining the maximum capacity listed in Table 1, the number of potential candidates with high theoretical capacities at first appears large. However, it is important to note that all two-electron candidates in the list are based on V$^{2-}$, Cr$^{2-}$, Ti$^{3-4}$, or Mo$^{3-4}$ redox couples. These metals are expected to exhibit a very large voltage step between the 2+/3+ and 3+/4+ redox couples, with the 2+/3+ couple being very low in voltage even in phosphates. Therefore, even if two-electron transfer were achievable, these systems would probably not retain a high voltage for the entire range of intercalation. For example, LiVSiO$_4$ (id #58385, mentioned earlier) can potentially exchange 2 electrons via the V$^{2/3}$ and V$^{3/4}$ redox couples, but we expect that the voltage of the V$^{2/3}$ couple will be low (most likely under 3 V according to Fig. 5). Similarly, LiV[SiO$_4$]$_2$ (id #136667 in Table 1) has a maximum theoretical capacity of 208 mA h g$^{-1}$ for two-electron operation as Li$_{0.2}$V(SiO$_4$)$_2$, but the 4.38 V computation is for the Li$_{0.1}$V(SiO$_4$)$_2$ range (we note that another polymorph that is close to 100 meV per atom metastable in the charged state also exists at 5.07 V, e.g. see the outlier in Fig. 1). Lithiating LiV(SiO$_4$)$_2$ further to Li$_2$V(SiO$_4$)$_2$ would require using the V$^{2/3}$ redox couple, which we expect to exhibit a low voltage (between 2.0 to 3.5 V according to Fig. 5).

One exception might be the NASICON-based Li$_3$Mo$_2$(PO$_4$)$_3$–Li$_4$Mo$_2$(PO$_4$)$_3$ material, which could use the Mo$^{3-5}$ couple within a fairly high voltage range if fully charged to Mo$_2$(PO$_4$)$_3$. We previously suggested that Li$_3$Mo$_2$(PO$_4$)$_3$ mixed with Fe could make a promising cathode material based on targeted mixing of transition metals.

**Discussion**

The design of new cathode materials that exceed the energy density of those currently on the market while retaining safety is a complex optimization problem. The optimization becomes even more complicated as other factors are considered; for example, although nanosizing of electrode particles can enhance rate capability, it can also increase reactivity with the electrolyte and thereby reduce safety.

The two ways to increase energy stored in cathode materials is to increase capacity or to increase voltage. For polyanion systems, increasing the capacity beyond that of the known oxides requires exchanging two-electrons per transition metal. Materials that can accomplish this feat within a desirable voltage range and without decomposing are extremely rare. The second method of increasing energy stored, raising the voltage, is attractive because voltage increases not only energy density but also power delivered for a given current density. High-voltage cathodes become essential to high energy density if paired with anodes that are significantly higher in voltage than Li metal, e.g., lithium titanate.

Unfortunately, we find evidence for the general principle first suggested by Godshall et al. – that high voltages correlate with lower safety. However, the broader test set investigated in this work reveals that the trend is not as rigid as reported by Godshall et al. Some cathode materials have significantly higher safety than others at the same voltage. In particular, at a given voltage, polyanions offer improved intrinsic safety compared to oxides. The best polyanion systems for achieving high voltage and safety are sulfates, followed by the phosphates, borates, and silicates. However, we also observed the unintuitive result that for a given redox couple, the polyanion systems demonstrated on average a O$_2$ release temperature that was comparable to or worse than oxides.

That the polyanions can exhibit poorer safety for a given redox couple is also consistent with typical oxidation energies of metal oxides versus metal polyanion systems. As an example, we compute the energy of Mn$_2$O$_3$ reduction to MnO and O$_2$ (Mn$^{2/3}$ in oxides) to be 397 kJ mol$^{-1}$O$_2$, whereas the energy of MnPO$_4$ reduction to Mn$_2$P$_2$O$_7$ and O$_2$ (Mn$^{2/3}$ in phosphates) to be only 150 kJ mol$^{-1}$O$_2$. Compared to the oxide, it is much easier to reduce the Mn$^{3+}$ to Mn$^{2+}$ and form O$_2$ gas in the phosphate, leading to a lower O$_2$ release temperature.

We found only a few distinct redox couples in our set of compounds in Table 1 screened for high voltage, stability, and safety. These are: Fe$^{2/3}$, Mn$^{2/3}$ (sometimes), V$^{3/4}$, Mo$^{3/4}$ (sometimes), Cu$^{1/2}$, Ti$^{3/4}$ (sometimes), and Cr$^{2/3}$. In Fig. 5, we find little evidence that other redox couples, with the possible exception of V$^{4/5}$, Mo$^{4/5}$, and Mo$^{5/6}$, could provide both high safety and high voltage. The data in Fig. 5 indicates that some redox couples (such as Fe$^{2/3}$, Cu$^{2/3}$ and Co and Ni systems) are instead quite unlikely to simultaneously possess both a high voltage and intrinsic resistance to O$_2$ release.

We observed that using a lower ratio of O/X might increase voltage without adversely affecting safety for X = P. Indeed, several of the high-voltage, high-safety candidates listed in Table 1 are pyrophosphate materials. Although we did not find clear evidence that lowering the O/X ratio is beneficial for the other polyanions, the set of compounds in Table 1 also includes a few condensed borates and condensed silicates. It is important to note, however, that lowering O/X ratios also limits maximum achievable capacity. In a previous publication, we demonstrated that polyanion groups with a large ratio of negative charge-to-mass are capable of the highest theoretical capacities (along with low-valent redox couples, e.g., 2+/3+). Condensed polyanion groups possess lower anion charge-to-weight ratios and therefore lower capacities. For example, use of the entire Fe$^{2/3}$ couple in an orthophosphate (such as LiFePO$_4$) has a theoretical capacity of 170 mA h g$^{-1}$. However, the same Fe$^{2/3}$ redox couple...
in a pyrophosphate (such as Li$_2$FeP$_2$O$_7$) has a significantly lower theoretical capacity of 110 mA h g$^{-1}$. Therefore, the capacity penalty can be quite severe when using condensed polyanion groups as a route towards safety, although part of this capacity loss should be mitigated by a higher voltage.

In our study, there exist several compounds with high voltage and relatively high safety, but coupled with low thermodynamic stability in the charged state (i.e., close to the 150 meV per atom decomposition energy cutoff employed). It is well known that instability in the charged state leads to high voltages: for example, id #38176 in Table 1 is a Li$_2$V$_2$B$_2$O$_7$$_2$ polymorph with a 147 meV per atom instability in the charged state and a fairly high voltage of 3.67 relative to other V$_{3+/4+}$ borates in Fig. 5. However, such charged state instability (with respect to solid phases) might have other side effects, such as cathode decomposition to more stable polymorphs and solid phase mixtures upon cycling.

Overall, our study suggests that the search for both safe and high-voltage cathodes requires designing in a narrow chemical space. To achieve high energy densities with good safety, it might be more practical to address safety concerns by engineering the electrolyte, using alternate electrolytes such as solid state electrolytes or ionic liquids, or by adding surface coatings to cathode particles. We note, however, that our analysis does not include mixed metal systems or assess kinetic barriers to O$_2$ release. Alternatively, oxygen-free cathodes based on fluorides or sulfides might avoid the O$_2$ release issue altogether, although it is currently uncertain if other detrimental side reactions could occur.

**Conclusion**

In this work, we used high-throughput computations on 1409 compounds to systematically investigate the effects of polyanion group, redox metal, and ratio of oxygen to counter cation on voltage and O$_2$ release temperature. Overall, we find a strong inverse relationship between voltage and safety that resembles results reported almost 3 decades ago by Godshall et al. However, our data indicates that the relationship is not as rigid as that found previously: we find that just over half of the variance in our data set for O$_2$ release temperature can be attributed to voltage alone.

We additionally find that safety is higher in polyanion systems compared to oxides for a given voltage. However, we also obtain the non-obvious result that the safety of polyanion systems is comparable to or lower than oxides for a given redox couple. We report a set of compounds that exhibit both high voltage and high O$_2$ release temperature in our calculations, but find few general rules for designing safe cathode systems. Condensed phosphates, and to some degree condensed borates, appear to provide higher voltage at comparable thermal stability, but at the cost of limited capacity. Using our data set, we tabulate redox potentials and oxidation potentials for over 105 combinations of redox couple/anion. However, only a few redox couples within a few polyanion systems appear capable of possessing both high voltage and safety. Therefore, safety mechanisms other than intrinsic cathode resistance to O$_2$ release (such as coatings or alternate electrolytes) might be practical alternatives to achieve the goal of designing safe, high voltage Li ion batteries.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge Bosch and Umicore for funding. Work at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory was supported by the Assistant Secretary for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, under Contract No. DE-AC02-05CH11231. We also acknowledge of the Materials Project database for some of the analysis in this paper through the Department of Energy's Basic Energy Sciences program under Grant No. EDCBEE. In addition, we thank Charles J. Moore for helping perform the calculations in the database and for useful comments, as well as William D. Richardson for contributions to the pymatgen analysis library used in this work.

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