

# Sulfonate-Functionalized Polyoxovanadate-Based Metal-Organic Polyhedra for Enhanced Proton Conduction *via* the Synergy of Linker and Metal Cluster Vertex

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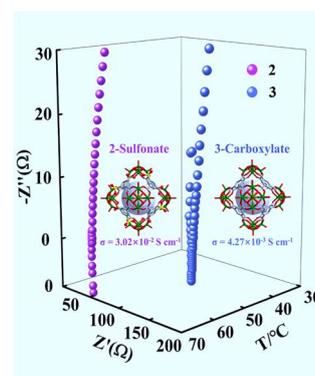
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**ABSTRACT** Metal-organic polyhedra (MOPs) have emerged as novel porous platforms for proton conduction, however, the concerted employment of both linker and metal cluster vertex is rarely applied for the fabrication of MOPs-based high conducting materials. Herein we report the synthesis of sulfonate-functionalized polyoxovanadate-based MOPs for enhanced proton conduction *via* the synergistic effect from linker and metal cluster node. MOPs **1** and **2** exhibit octahedral cage configuration constructed from  $\{V_5O_9Cl\}$  vertex and 5-sulfoisophthalate linker. Owing to the ordered packing of octahedral cages along three axes, 3D interpenetrated open channels that are lined with high-density sulfonates are thus formed within **2**. Coupled with the proton-conductive  $\{V_5O_9Cl\}$  vertices as well as protonated counterions, an extensive H-bonded network is therefore generated for facile proton transfer. **2** exhibits high proton conductivity of  $3.02 \times 10^{-2} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  at 65 °C under 90% RH, recording the highest value for MOPs pellet sample. This value is enhanced ~1 order of magnitude compared with that of carboxylate-functionalized analogue **3**, clearly illustrating the advantage of combining linker and metal cluster node for enhanced proton conduction. This work will further promote the exploitation of high proton conductive MOPs-based materials by the synergy design strategy.

**Keywords:** metal-organic polyhedra, proton conduction, polyoxovanadate, synergistic effect



## INTRODUCTION

Consumption of conventional fossil fuels to produce energy has caused serious energy crisis and environmental pollution to the world.<sup>[1]</sup> In the context of searching for renewable energy conversion technology, fuel cells provide a green alternative to transform chemical energy into electricity.<sup>[2]</sup> Particularly, proton exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFCs) have been regarded as one type of very promising fuel cells for power supply in both power stations and portable electronic devices.<sup>[3]</sup> As the key component of PEMFCs, proton exchange membrane (PEM) should meet the requirements of high proton conductivity, excellent stability and durability as well as competitive low-cost.<sup>[4-6]</sup> Although the commercially available Nafion films are predominantly used in PEMFCs, their high cost and low operating temperature (< 80 °C) limit the wide application. As such, a variety of crystalline porous materials including metal-organic frameworks (MOFs),<sup>[7-13]</sup> zeolites<sup>[14]</sup> and covalent organic frameworks (COFs)<sup>[15-17]</sup> have been developed as promising solid-state proton conductors owing to the presence of intrinsic channels which favor the proton transfer and facile installation of proton conducting functionality.<sup>[18]</sup> Some prominent representatives can not only be prepared from cheap and simple starting materials but also show superior proton conductivity un-

der harsh conditions and over wide operation temperature.

Inspired by the progress achieved by the infinite porous materials mentioned above, metal-organic polyhedra (MOPs),<sup>[19-25]</sup> a class of discrete porous molecular containers, have been recently utilized as porous platforms for proton conduction.<sup>[26-30]</sup> The general strategy is to make the use of intrinsic porosity within the cage as well as the intermolecular channels as the proton-hopping pathway while incorporating proton transferring sites such as carboxylic acid, sulfonic acid and guest water either on the organic linkers or into the porosity.<sup>[31,32]</sup> The carboxylate and sulfonate functionalized MOPs have exhibited high proton conductivity compared with that of Nafion films.<sup>[26,29]</sup> Despite the significant advance, the development of MOP-based proton conductors is still limited, and to the best of our knowledge, the employment of both linker and metal/cluster node as proton conducting sites is hardly explored for such materials.<sup>[28]</sup>

Polyoxometalates (POMs) are a unique class of discrete anionic metal-oxo clusters with O-enriched surfaces that can provide abundant proton conducting sites for efficient proton transfer.<sup>[33-36]</sup> Nevertheless, POMs suffer from the drawback of intrinsically high solubility in water, which greatly restricts their applications in fuel cells. To solve this obstacle, loading of POMs in highly porous carriers such as MOFs and COFs has been proved to be an effi-

cient approach to construct stable POM-based proton conductors.<sup>[37,38]</sup> In contrast, anchoring POMs into porous MOPs for proton conduction has been rarely explored although POMs are widely used as metal cluster vertexes to fabricate MOPs.<sup>[39-46]</sup> In fact, if the linkers, guest molecules and even the counter ions are favorable for proton conduction, the POM-derived MOPs can not only make use of POM cluster vertexes but also all the other components to facilitate the formation of hydrogen bond networks. This provides a feasible approach to construct MOP-based high-performance proton conductors *via* synergistic effect.

Bearing this in mind, herein we report the synthesis of two octahedral MOPs (NMe<sub>4</sub>)<sub>x</sub>(NHMe<sub>3</sub>)<sub>14-x</sub>[Na<sub>6</sub>(V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl)<sub>4</sub>(L)<sub>8</sub>Cl<sub>4</sub>(C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub>N<sub>4</sub>)<sub>4</sub>]<sup>-</sup> (**1**), (NH<sub>2</sub>Me<sub>2</sub>)<sub>12</sub>[(V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl)<sub>6</sub>(L)<sub>8</sub>]·11CH<sub>3</sub>OH·12DMF (**2**) and (NH<sub>2</sub>Me<sub>2</sub>)<sub>12</sub>[(V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl)<sub>6</sub>(C<sub>9</sub>H<sub>3</sub>O<sub>6</sub>)<sub>8</sub>] (**3**), using the in-situ formed polyoxovanadate {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl} as vertex and 5-sulfoisophthalate (L) as linker (Scheme 1). Owing to the coexistence of sulfonates and POM clusters in the skeleton, coupled with protonated dimethylamine as proton conductors, compound **2** shows high proton conductivity of 3.02×10<sup>-2</sup> S cm<sup>-1</sup> at 65 °C and 90% RH, which is the highest value reported for MOPs pellet samples. In contrast, the octahedral MOP **3** constructed from the same cluster and trimesic acid exhibits much lower proton conductivity of 4.27×10<sup>-3</sup> S cm<sup>-1</sup> under the same conditions, indicating the unique advantage of incorporating both proton-conductive metal cluster vertex and sulfonate on the linker for the enhancement of proton conductivity *via* synergistic effect.

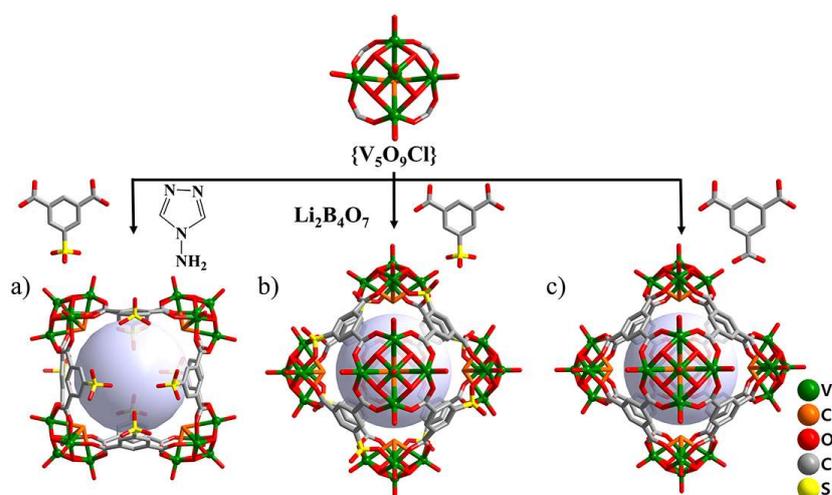
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Syntheses and Structures of 1 and 2.** The crystal of compound **1** was obtained under solvothermal conditions by heating a mixture of VCl<sub>3</sub>, 5-sulfoisophthalic acid monosodium salt and 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole in DMF/CH<sub>3</sub>OH mixture (DMF = N,N'-dimethylformamide) at 130 °C for 3 days. Single-crystal X-ray structural analysis reveals that **1** crystallizes in the monoclinic space group C2/c (Table S1). The molecular structure of **1** adopts an open octahedral cage with two vertexes missing in apical positions (Scheme 1a). The vertex consists of bowl-shaped {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl} cluster defined by one {VO<sub>5</sub>} tetragonal pyramid that is surrounded by four {VO<sub>5</sub>Cl}

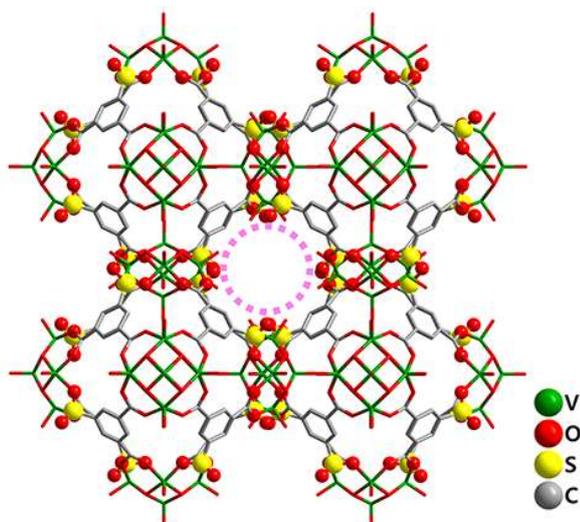
octahedra. The V-O bond distances in {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl} range from 1.592(5) to 2.021(4) Å (Table S2). Bond valence sum (BVS) calculations indicate that the apical vanadium is +5 and four basal plane vanadium atoms are +4, which is consistent with previous reports (Table S4).<sup>[47]</sup> Two sets of four L locate above and below the equatorial plane, respectively, with the two carboxylates connecting two adjacent {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl} vertexes while the sulfonate coordinating to the sodium counterions. There are there crystallographically independent sodium atoms. The octahedral coordination sphere of Na1 is fulfilled by five oxygen atoms from sulfonates and one chloride, while Na2 adopts distorted mono-capped triangular prism coordination geometry defined by six oxygen atoms from three sulfonates and one chloride as the cap. The coordination environment of Na3 can also be described as mono-capped triangular prism surrounded by three sulfonates and two 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole molecules which are encapsulated within the cavity of octahedron (Figure S1). In this way, the neighbouring open cages are thus joined by two sets of {Na<sub>3</sub>} clusters to form a 1D zigzag chain. The void constructed from the packing of zigzag chains is occupied by protonated trimethylamine and tetramethyl ammonium which are probably derived from the decomposition of 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole (Figure S2).

It should be noted that 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole is indispensable for the synthesis of **1**. This compound on one hand can behave as ligand coordinating to sodium atoms together with sulfonates on 5-sulfoisophthalate; this prevents the further coordination of sulfonates to the V centers in {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl} and thus allows the formation of open octahedral cage. On the other hand, the counter cations (trimethylammonium and tetramethyl ammonium) derived from 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole also play important roles in directing the self-assembly. Owing to the bigger size as compared with dimethylammonium, trimethylammonium and tetramethyl ammonium will accelerate the growth and precipitation of crystals. This can reduce the possibility of sulfonates to interact with V centers in {V<sub>5</sub>O<sub>9</sub>Cl}, therefore leaving sulfonates uncoordinated, which in turn facilitates the formation of open cage-like **1** instead of a closed octahedron.

Using Li<sub>2</sub>B<sub>4</sub>O<sub>7</sub> instead of 4-amino-1,2,4-triazole afforded com-



**Scheme 1.** Schematic representation of the preparation of **1** a), **2** b), and **3** c). Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity. Large light purple spheres represent the free space inside the cages.



**Figure 1.** The view of the open channels lined with sulfonates in **2**. The channel is highlighted by pink dotted circle.

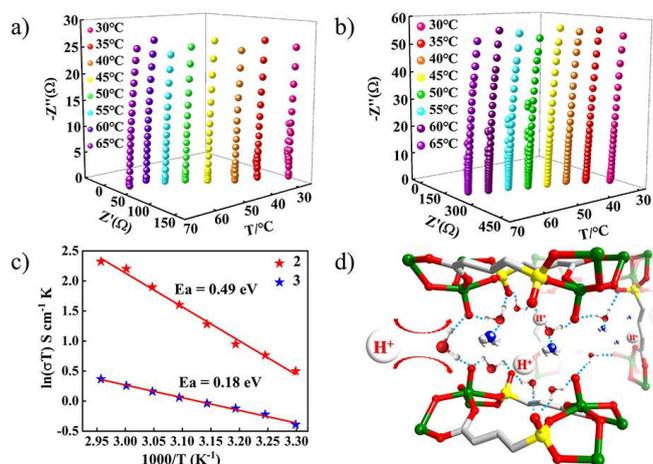
compound **2**. Borates are well known for their critical roles in guiding the self-assembly of polyoxovanadates.<sup>[48,49]</sup> The presence of  $\text{Li}_2\text{B}_4\text{O}_7$  during the synthesis is supposed to facilitate and stabilize the formation of  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  build blocks, which is then gradually substituted by 5-sulfoisophthalate to induce the formation of octahedron **2**. Similar phenomenon has been observed during the assembly of gigantic polyoxoniobates  $\{\text{Nb}_{288}\}$  and  $\{\text{Nb}_{114}\}$  wherein  $\text{Li}_2\text{B}_4\text{O}_7$  is essential for the generation of such clusters.<sup>[50,51]</sup> Single crystal X-ray structural analysis shows that **2** crystallizes in the cubic space group  $Fm\bar{3}$  (Table S1). As depicted in Scheme 1b, the molecular structure of **2** features a regular octahedral cage similar to reported **3** (Scheme 1c) in which the octahedron is built from 1,3,5-benzenetricarboxylate and  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$ .<sup>[52]</sup> In contrast to **1**, both the carboxylates and sulfonates in **2** coordinate to V centers in  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$ , thus generating a closed octahedron. The V-O bond distances and the valence of V in  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  are almost the same as **1** (Table S3 and S5). Bond valence sum (BVS) calculations show the same result as **1**, which is further confirmed by XPS with the ratio of  $\text{V}^{\text{IV}}$  to  $\text{V}^{\text{V}}$  as 4:1 (Figure S3). Owing to the high symmetry, the ordered packing of **2** gives rise to interpenetrated channels along three axes with a size of  $\sim 5.0 \times 5.0 \text{ \AA}$  (Figure 1 and Figure S4). More importantly, sulfonates are evenly lined on the inner surface of the open channels with high-density, providing a 3D pathway for proton transfer (Figure 1). According to PLATON analysis,<sup>[53]</sup> the estimated solvent-accessible volume for **2** is  $13859.7 \text{ \AA}^3$  (53%), which is accommodated by dimethylammonium cations and guest molecules of DMF and MeOH.

Due to the poor repeatability of **1**, only **2** was subjected to basic characterization and used for further property study. The phase purity of **2** could be proved by the good agreement between experimental and simulated PXRD pattern (Figure S6). TGA analysis indicated the weight loss (17.31%) between 50 and  $340 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  is due to the removal of 11  $\text{CH}_3\text{OH}$  and 12 DMF, followed by a weight loss (8.63%) corresponding to the release of 12  $[\text{NH}_2\text{Me}_2]^+$  cations from 340 to  $380 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . Subsequently, the skeleton is decomposed at higher temperature (Figure S7). The characteristic peaks of  $-\text{NH}_2$

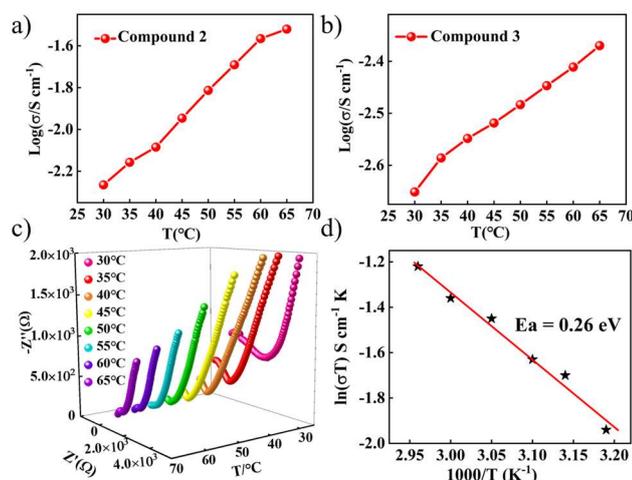
group on  $[\text{NH}_2\text{Me}_2]^+$  ( $3435 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ),  $\text{V}=\text{O}$  ( $1007$  and  $986 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{V}-\text{O}-\text{V}$  ( $529-772 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) as well as sulfonates stretching vibration ( $1201$  and  $1048 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) can be clearly identified from IR spectrum, further confirming the composition and structural integrity of **2** (Figure S8).<sup>[52,54]</sup>

**Proton Conduction of 2 and 3.** Compound **2** contains high-density hydrophilic sites, such as sulfonates on the linkers, terminal oxygen atoms on  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  vertexes, and protonated counterions (e.g.  $[\text{NH}_2\text{Me}_2]^+$ ), implying the potential of this material to act as a good solid proton conductor. Therefore, the proton conductivity of crystalline powder sample **2** was measured by alternating current (AC) impedance measurement under various relative humidities (RH 60%–90%) and temperatures ( $30-65 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ). At  $30 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , the proton conductivity of **2** is  $1.29 \times 10^{-7}$  and  $5.43 \times 10^{-3} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  when the RH is 60% and 90%, respectively (Table S6). The proton conductivity increases 4 orders of magnitude with RH enhancing from moderate to high humidity and the proton conductivity rises linearly with the increase of RH (Figure S9), suggesting that water molecules play a momentous role in proton conducting and migration within the 3D channels of **2**. As demonstrated by the water-vapor adsorption and desorption isotherms (Figure S10), **2** exhibits an excellent water-adsorption capacity ( $318 \text{ mg/g}$ ) especially at higher RH. This allows the formation of more hydrogen-bonds *via* adsorbed water molecules, thereby further facilitating the proton transport.

To further exploit the relationship between temperature and proton conductivity, the temperature-dependent proton conducting performance of **2** was measured from  $30$  to  $65 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  at 90% RH (Figure 2a). As shown in Figure 3a, the proton conductivity of **2** enhances linearly with the increase of temperature, because higher temperature will facilitate the formation of  $\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$  and hasten the proton migration.<sup>[55]</sup> Even at  $30 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , relatively high conductivity of  $5.43 \times 10^{-3} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  can be obtained (Table S8), indicating the extensive hydrogen-bonded network formed by sulfonate group,  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  vertex,  $[\text{NH}_2\text{Me}_2]^+$  and free water molecules in the 3D



**Figure 2.** a) Nyquist plots of compound **2** at 90% RH from  $30$  to  $65 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . b) Nyquist plots of compound **3** at 90% RH from  $30$  to  $65 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ . c) Arrhenius plots with activation energies ( $E_a$ ) for **2** and **3** at 90% RH. d) The proposed mechanism of proton conduction of **2**.



**Figure 3.** a) Proton conductivity of compound **2** at different temperatures. b) Proton conductivity of compound **3** at different temperatures. c) Nyquist plots of compound **2** at 80% RH from 30 to 65 °C. d) Arrhenius plots with activation energies ( $E_a$ ) for **2** at 80% RH.

channels can efficiently promote the proton transfer even at low temperature.<sup>[31,56]</sup> When above 65 °C, the proton conductivity of **2** reaches  $3.02 \times 10^{-2} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$ , which is comparable to that of commercial Nafion, and ranks among the highest proton conducting performance recorded by high-proton conductors, such as MOFs and COFs.<sup>[26,57,58]</sup> Furthermore, this value is also comparable with that of the best POM-based proton conductors (Table S11).<sup>[59–61]</sup> More importantly, this value represents the highest proton conductivity reported so far by MOPs in compressed pellet and is only slightly inferior to the benchmark  $5.8 \times 10^{-2} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  achieved by the single crystal sample of MOP  $[\text{Cr}_4\text{In}_4(\text{Himdc})_{12}]$  (Table S10).<sup>[25]</sup>

In order to elucidate the effect of sulfonates on the proton conduction, **3** was prepared and used for proton conductivity measurement under identical conditions. **3** is isostructural analogue of **2**, composed of octahedral cage built from  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  and trimesic acid (Scheme 1c and Figure S5).<sup>[52]</sup> The proton conductivity of **3** only increase  $\sim 2$  times from  $2.23 \times 10^{-3}$  to  $4.27 \times 10^{-3} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  when the temperature varies from 30 to 65 °C (Figure 2b and 3b and Table S9). In contrast, in the presence of sulfonate, the conductivity of **2** enlarges almost 6 times and the highest value obtained at 65 °C is around one order of magnitude higher than that of **3** (Figure 3a). Since the crystal structure and packing mode are quite similar to each other, the dramatic difference in proton conductivity for **2** and **3** mainly derives from the dense alignment of sulfonate within the 3D open channels of **2**, resulting in more pathways and sites for proton mobility.

To probe the mechanisms of proton conduction for **2** and **3**, the activation energy ( $E_a$ ) was measured at 90% RH in the range of 30–65 °C. The  $E_a$  of **3** is 0.18 eV based on the calculation of Arrhenius plot (Figure 2c), implying that the protons migrate by Grotthuss mechanism ( $E_a < 0.4 \text{ eV}$ ).<sup>[62]</sup> The  $E_a$  of **2** is estimated as 0.49 eV, a value falling between the standard of Grotthuss mechanism and vehicle mechanism ( $E_a > 0.5 \text{ eV}$ ) (Figure 2c). We therefore propose that the protons transfer mainly through the Grotthuss mechanism, and partially by vehicle mechanism.<sup>[63–65]</sup>

This is also supported by the  $E_a$  (0.26 eV) measured at 80% RH (Table S7, Figure 3c and 3d), which further confirms the predominant role of Grotthuss mechanism. Based on what discussed above, the proton transfer pathway for **2** is depicted (Figure 2d). In addition to the extended H-bonded proton-hopping pathways constructed from  $-\text{SO}_3^-$ ,  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  metal cluster, the absorbed water molecules and  $[\text{NH}_2\text{Me}_2]^+$ , the  $\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$  can also serve as proton carrier to deliver the protons via self-diffusion based on vehicular mechanism. Moreover, **2** and **3** show outstanding integrity after AC impedance measurement test (Figure S11 and S12).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have showed a strategy that combines the proton conducting POM cluster vertex and linker to build two sulfonate-functionalized polyoxovanadate-based MOPs for enhanced proton conductivity. Due to the synergistic effect from  $\{\text{V}_5\text{O}_9\text{Cl}\}$  vertexes and sulfonates on linkers, extensive hydrogen bonded network is formed together with the protonated counterions as well as the adsorbed water molecules. As such, **2** exhibits high proton conductivity of  $3.02 \times 10^{-2} \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  at 65 °C under 90% RH, which records the highest value for MOPs measured in the pellet sample. In particular, this value is about 1 order of magnitude higher than that of carboxylate-functionalized analogue **3**, demonstrating the significance of installing proton conducting sites on both metal cluster vertex and linker. This work not only sheds lights on developing high proton-conductive MOP materials using the synergy of linker and vertex, but also may provide a general strategy to improve the proton conductivity for coordination-driven materials.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Yu Zhang, Shan-shan Liu and Bo Li contribute equally to this work.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Supplementary information is available for this paper at <http://manu30.magtech.com.cn/jghx/EN/10.14102/j.cnki.0254-5861.2022-0127>

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