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Jérémy Bourgalais, Xavier Mercier, Muneerah Mogren Al-Mogren, Majdi Hochlaf. Accurate Prediction of Adiabatic Ionization Energies for PAHs and Substituted Analogues. *Journal of Physical Chemistry A*, 2023, 127 (40), pp.8447-8458. 10.1021/acs.jpca.3c04088 . hal-04234691

HAL Id: hal-04234691

<https://hal.science/hal-04234691v1>

Submitted on 10 Oct 2023

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1 Accurate Prediction of Adiabatic Ionization Energies for
2 PAHs and Substituted Analogues:
3 *Advancements with the M06-2X Density Functional*
4 *Theory Method*

5 Jérémy Bourgalais,^{1,*} Xavier Mercier,² Muneerah Mogren Al-Mogren,³ and Majdi Hochlaf^{4,*}

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17 **ABSTRACT**

18 Accurate calculation of AIEs for PAHs and their substituted analogues is important for
19 understanding their electronic properties, reactivity, stability, and environmental/health
20 implications. This work demonstrates that the M06-2X density functional theory (DFT) method
21 performs well in predicting the adiabatic ionization energies (AIEs) of polycyclic aromatic
22 hydrocarbons (PAHs) and related molecules, outperforming common DFT methods and competing
23 in accuracy to the highly accurate CCSD(T)-F12 method. The accuracy of M06-2X is attributed to its
24 large quantity of Hartree-Fock (HF) exchange and its ability to describe diffuse wave functions,
25 which may make it suitable for predicting electronic properties associated with Rydberg-like
26 electronic states. This suggests that M06-2X, with an appropriate basis set, is a reliable and
27 efficient method for studying the PAHs and related molecules in conjunction with experimental
28 techniques. The set of molecules used in this work includes also PAHs with hetero-atoms that can
29 be found in biofuels or nucleic acid bases, making it of great interest for photoionization
30 experiments and mass spectrometry. Down the road, this method will help understanding the
31 relationship of various PAHs to graphene, guiding material research or electronic applications, and
32 validating theoretical calculation methods.

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35 Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are a type of organic compound composed of fused
36 aromatic rings. In PAHs, all carbon atoms are sp^2 hybridized, resulting in a highly stable and fully
37 conjugated delocalized aromatic π -electron system, which allows for a planar structure, assuming
38 there are no steric repulsions present. PAHs are produced during incomplete combustion of organic
39 matter and can be found in various environmental sources such as air, food, water, and soil.¹⁻³ Due
40 to their wide distribution and potential toxicity, PAHs and their formation mechanisms have been
41 extensively investigated in fields such as atmospheric sciences,^{4,5} astrochemistry,⁶⁻⁸ combustion
42 science,⁹⁻¹³ and material sciences.^{14,15}

43 The ionization energy is a fundamental electronic property that plays a pivotal role in comprehending
44 the properties and behavior of PAHs, as well as other organic compounds and materials. Precise
45 predictions of PAH ionization energies can yield valuable insights into their chemical reactivity, as
46 these energies are directly correlated to molecular stability and reactivity. Knowledge of PAH
47 ionization energies can guide the design of novel materials targeting desired electronic properties
48 and aid in the interpretation of experimental data, such as spectroscopic measurements and
49 chemical reactions involving PAHs. Moreover, the ionization energy is closely intertwined with the
50 electronic structure of PAHs, as it reflects the distribution and energy levels of molecular orbitals, as
51 well as the stability of charged species. Understanding the electronic structure of PAHs is crucial for
52 predicting their optical properties, electronic transport properties, and environmental behavior.
53 Accurate predictions of ionization energies serve as a foundation for elucidating the behavior of PAHs
54 in various systems and applications, and facilitate the optimization of PAH-based materials for
55 diverse technological and environmental purposes.

56 The ionization energy of PAHs can be investigated through a combination of experimental and
57 theoretical approaches. Experimental methods such as photoionization mass spectrometry and
58 photoelectron spectroscopy involve exposing molecules to soft photon sources, typically in the
59 vacuum ultraviolet (VUV) range, which promotes electrons from the ground state of neutral species
60 to higher-energy states of the ionized respective compounds. By analyzing the photon energy at
61 which the first ionization event occurs and examining the resulting mass spectra for fragmentation
62 patterns and relative abundances of the ionized fragments, the ionization energies, as well as the
63 molecular structure and properties, can be estimated. Photoelectron spectra can also provide
64 information about the kinetic energies of the ejected electrons, which can offer insights into the
65 ionization energy and electronic structure of PAHs.¹⁶⁻²¹

66 Theoretical calculations using quantum chemistry methods also complement experimental
67 measurements by providing estimates of the ionization energy of molecules. These methods involve
68 solving the electronic Schrödinger equation for the molecule and obtaining the ionization energy
69 from the energy difference between the neutral and ionized states. Historically, the “gold standard”

70 quantum method for determining ionization energies of monoconfigurational molecular systems has
71 been the coupled cluster method with singles, doubles, and perturbative triples ((R)CCSD(T)) in
72 conjunction with the aug-cc-pVTZ atomic basis set, which is known for its high accuracy and
73 predictive potentialities.^{22,23} However, (R)CCSD(T) has a computational cost that scales steeply with
74 the size of the system as it involves calculating higher-order excitations and requires extensive
75 memory and storage, making it impractical for studying large molecules such as PAHs. Instead,
76 density functional theory (DFT)^{24,25} is a popular alternative to coupled clusters methods due to its
77 computational efficiency and relatively good accuracy for a wide range of systems. However, despite
78 its widespread success, the use of approximate exchange-correlation functionals provide different
79 levels of accuracy, depending on the specific system being studied and the properties of interest.^{24,26}
80 In DFT, the electron density is treated as the basic variable, and the electron-electron correlation
81 effects are approximated through the exchange-correlation functional.

82 In recent years, advancements in DFT methods, such as hybrid functionals, have shown promise in
83 improving the accuracy of ionization energy calculations. However, the choice of functional can
84 significantly impact the accuracy of predictions, and it is important to carefully select an appropriate
85 functional for a given molecular system (see for instance Semmeq et al.²⁷). In particular, hybrid
86 functionals combine local exchange-correlation functional of DFT with a fraction of the exact
87 exchange energy calculated from Hartree-Fock (HF) theory. The amount of HF exchange used in
88 hybrid functionals is analogous to the electronic correlation energy considered in CCSD(T) *ab initio*
89 methods. Electron correlation effects can be significant in PAHs due to their large size and
90 delocalized π -electron systems, leading to strong static and dynamic correlation effects to be
91 accounted for. Among hybrid functionals, M06-2X²⁸ is known for its accuracy in predicting a wide
92 range of molecular properties, including bond lengths, bond angles, reaction energies, and
93 noncovalent interactions. For ionization energies, M06-2X has been identified as the most promising
94 functional within the Minnesota family²⁹ and exhibiting strong competitiveness with other
95 functionals.³⁰

96 In this work, we present a significant breakthrough in computational chemistry by demonstrating
97 that M06-2X DFT can accurately calculate the adiabatic ionization energies (AIEs) of PAHs and
98 substituted analogues across a wide range of molecular systems, having masses from low molecular
99 mass (<100 u) to relatively high atomic mass (400 u). This work also demonstrates that the
100 performance of M06-2X is comparable, in this context, to the widely regarded high-level *ab initio*
101 explicitly correlated method (R)CCSD(T)-F12, which is used as reference for quantum chemical
102 calculations. Indeed, this approach in conjunction with a basis set of aug-ccp-V(X)Z quality allows
103 predicting molecular properties as accurate as the standard coupled clusters approach extrapolated
104 to the complete basis set (CBS) limit, whereas a strong reduction of computational cost (both CPU

105 time and disks occupancy) is observed.^{19,31,32} At the end of this manuscript, by employing the M06-2X
106 method, predictions of the AIEs of coronene-derivatives are given and compared to the referenced
107 AIE of graphene.

108

109 **Table 1.** Experimental reference AIE of naphthalene compared to the calculated AIEs using DFT and
110 coupled cluster approaches. For DFT computations, we described the atoms using the 6-311++G(d,p)
111 basis set.

Methods	AIE (eV)
Exp.	8.144 ³³
DFT	
M06-2X	8.144
B3LYP	7.867
ω b97X-D	7.953
B3PW91	7.912
PBE0	7.893
B97-2	7.804
CAM-B3LYP	7.974
TPSSh	7.759
X3LYP	7.828
Composite	
CBS-QB3	8.173
G4	8.143
Coupled-clusters	
(R)CCSD(T)/CBS	8.137
(R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ	8.121

112

113 Naphthalene (C₁₀H₈, m/z 128 a.u.) with its two fused benzene rings has first been chosen as a
114 benchmark system for validating theoretical models due to its well-defined and accurately
115 determined experimental AIE value. Indeed, the AIE of naphthalene was experimentally determined
116 to be 8.144 ± 0.0009 eV using a two-color multiphoton ionization technique.³³ Table 1 compares the
117 reference AIE value of naphthalene to calculated values with some of the commonly used hybrid DFT

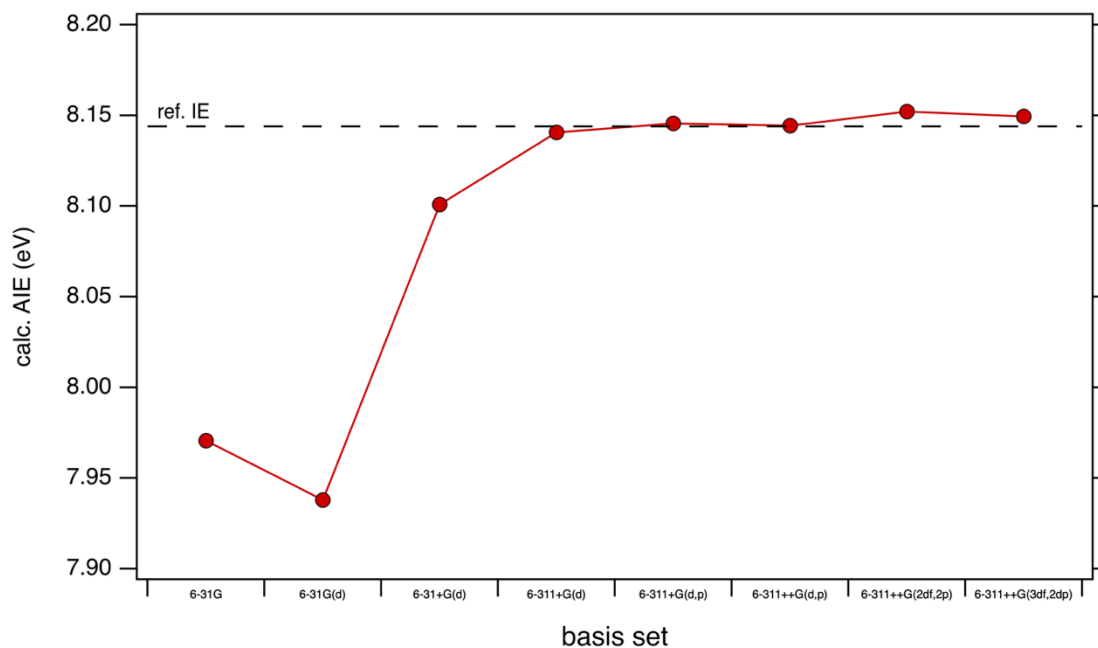
118 functionals in quantum chemistry and computational chemistry along with composite methods and
119 coupled clusters calculations (see computational methods section for more details).

120 M06-2X in conjunction with the 6-311++G(d,p) Pople basis set³⁴ has by far the most accurate AIE
121 value among the DFT methods with similar basis set size and is in an excellent agreement with the
122 reference AIE value. M06-2X includes 54% of HF exchange, which is higher than the amount of HF
123 exchange included in many other widely used hybrid DFT functionals, such as B3LYP^{35,36} (20%), PBE0³⁷
124 (25%), ω B97X-D³⁸ (10%). The higher amount of HF exchange in M06-2X can explain the present
125 accurate determination compared to other DFT methods for naphthalene.

126 Interestingly, the AIE with M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) is also more accurate than the values calculated
127 with the composite methods (CBS-QB3, G4, Table 1). Typically, composite methods use a separate
128 approach for geometry optimization and energy calculations. They employ high-level methods for
129 energy calculations, while geometry optimization is performed using lower-level methods to reduce
130 computational costs. The specific functional used for geometry optimization in composite methods
131 may vary depending on the composite method being used. Some commonly used methods, such as
132 the Gaussian-n (Gn) series of methods like G4³⁹, employ HF or post-HF methods, such as MP2 or
133 CCSD(T), for geometry optimizations. Other composite methods, such as the CBS-QB3^{40,41} technique,
134 use semiempirical methods, such as AM1 or PM3, for geometry optimizations. Semiempirical
135 methods are approximate quantum mechanical methods that rely on simplified Hamiltonians and
136 empirical parameters to describe molecular electronic structure. In G4, the geometry optimization is
137 typically performed using a high-level *ab initio* method, that includes electron correlation effects
138 beyond the mean-field approximation of the HF theory. This may explain the good agreement
139 between G4 and M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) for the AIE of naphthalene and the overestimation with CBS-
140 QB3. Finally, the accuracy of M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) is comparable to (R)CCSD(T) calculations for the
141 AIE of naphthalene. The electronic structure based CBS extrapolation method typically involves using
142 data from multiple levels of theory and basis sets to estimate the energy at the complete basis set
143 limit, which is considered to be the most accurate result. In this case, if the CBS extrapolation was
144 based on energies obtained from CCSD(T) calculations with cc-pVDZ and cc-pVTZ basis sets, there
145 could be some limitations associated with the accuracy of these lower-level calculations. Besides,
146 (R)CCSD(T)-F12 is a highly accurate post-SCF (self-consistent field) method that includes electron
147 correlation effects explicitly. Table 1 shows that M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) performs even better than
148 this reference *ab initio* method. It is possible that for the AIE of naphthalene, the level of electron
149 correlation included in M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) is sufficient to provide accurate results, while the
150 higher-order correlation effects captured by (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ may not be as crucial.


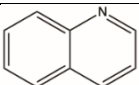
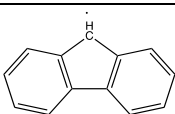
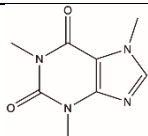
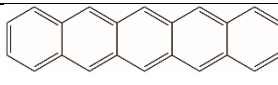

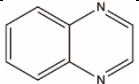
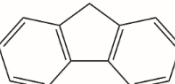
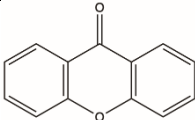
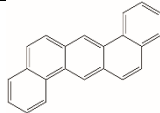

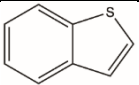
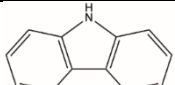
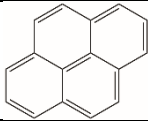


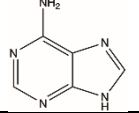
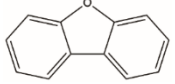
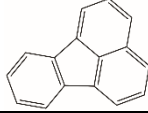
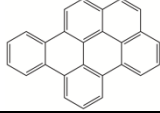
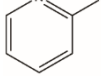
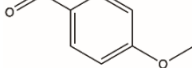
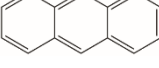
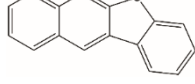

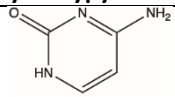
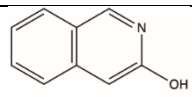
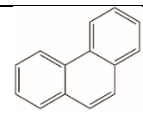
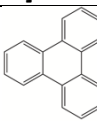
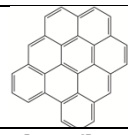
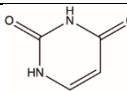
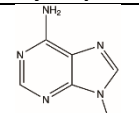
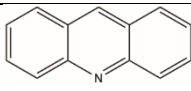
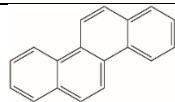
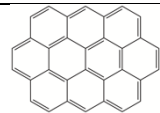
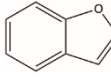
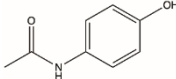
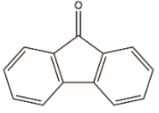
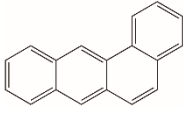
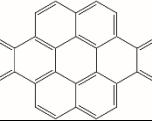
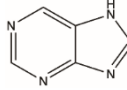
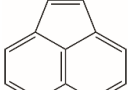
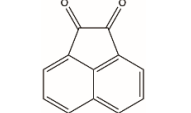
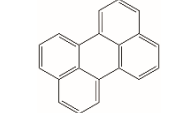
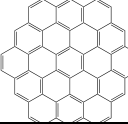
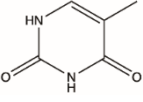
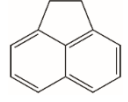
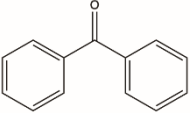
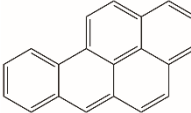
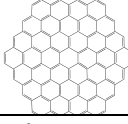
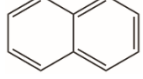
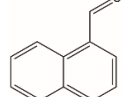
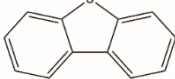

151 The choice of basis set can also impact the accuracy of calculated AIEs. (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ
152 uses an augmented correlation-consistent basis set (in conjunction with the corresponding density

153 fitting and resolution of identity basis sets), while M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) uses a DFT-specific basis
154 set. The basis set size and quality can affect the description of electron orbitals and their energies,
155 and can have an impact on the accuracy of calculated AIEs. Regarding the results, it seems that the
156 basis set used in M06-2X/6-311++G(d,p) is better suited for describing the electronic structure of
157 naphthalene in the context of AIE calculations.
158



159 **Figure 1.** Calculated AIE of naphthalene using M06-2X with various Pople basis sets compared to the
160 referenced ionization energy of naphthalene from Cockett et al.³³ (horizontal dashed line).
161

162
163 Basis set effects were probed to assess an appropriate level of theory for AIE calculations with the
164 M06-2X functional and the 6-31G, 6-31G(d), 6-31+G(d), 6-311+G(d), 6-311+G(d,p), 6-311++G(d,p), 6-
165 311++G(2df,2p), and 6-311++G(3df,2dp) basis sets. Figure 1 shows minimal changes in the AIE of
166 naphthalene when different basis sets are used beyond M06-2X/6-311+G(d) and that the AIE is even
167 overestimated when the basis set is increased to M06-2X/6-311++G(3df,2dp). One can think that the
168 distribution of electron density near the ionization site may also be overestimated by basis sets with
169 more diffuse functions. Diffuse functions are designed to capture electron density that is spread out
170 over larger regions of space, including regions further away from the atomic nucleus. While they
171 improve the accuracy of calculations involving long-range interactions and electron correlation, they
172 may potentially lead to an overestimation of the AIE in certain cases. When the ionization process
173 involves removing an electron from a localized orbital, the inclusion of diffuse functions can
174 artificially enhance the electron density in the vicinity of the ionization site, resulting in an
175 exaggerated stabilization effect.

				
pyrrole	quinoline	fluorenyl	caffeine	pentacene
				
benzene	quinoxaline	fluorene	xanthone	dibenz[a,h]anthracene
				
toluene	benzo[b]thiophene	carbazole	pyrene	coronene
				
2-pyridone	adenine	dibenzofuran	fluoranthene	dibenzo[b,pqr]perylene
				
2-hydroxypyridine	anisaldehyde	anthracene	benzo[b]naphtho[2,3-d]furan	benzo[a]coronene
				
cytosine	3-hydroxyisoquinoline	phenanthrene	triphenylene	dibenzo[bc,ef]coronene
				
uracil	9-methyl adenine	acridine	chrysene	ovalene
				
2,3-benzofuran	paracetamol	fluorenone	benz[a]anthracene	dibenzo[a,j]coronene
				
purine	acenaphthylene	1,2-acenaphthenequinone	perylene	circumcoronene
				
thymine	acenaphthene	benzophenone	benzo[a]pyrene	circumcircumcoronene
				

naphthalene	1-naphthaldehyde	dibenzothiophene	benzo[ghi]perylene
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178

179 **Table 3.** Calculated AIEs (in eV) in this work of various PAHs and substituted analogues with M06-
180 2X/6-311+G(d), (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ and compared to reference experimental values from
181 the literature. The chemical structures are given in Table 2. A hyphen indicates either the failure of
182 convergence in the calculation or the absence of a reference for the AIE in the literature.

Molecular mass (u)	Name	Exp.	Calc. (M06-2X/6-311+G(d))	Calc. ((R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ)
67	pyrrole	8.207 ⁴²	8.211	8.166
78	benzene	9.243 ⁴²	9.211	9.234
92	toluene	8.828 ⁴²	8.778	8.803
95	2-pyridone	8.443 ⁴³	8.482	8.430
	2-hydroxypyridine	8.933 ⁴³	8.942	8.916
111	cytosine	8.738 ⁴⁴	8.835	8.773
112	uracil	9.32 ⁴⁵	9.39	9.337
118	2,3-benzofuran	8.35 ⁴⁶	8.355	8.314
120	purine	9.12 ⁴⁵	9.33	9.122
126	thymine	8.913 ⁴⁷	8.931	8.909
128	naphthalene	8.144 ⁴²	8.141	8.121
129	quinoline	8.63 ⁴²	8.625	8.623
130	quinoxaline	8.89 ⁴⁸	9.015	8.882
134	Benzo[b]thiophene	8.73 ⁴²	8.758	-
136	anisaldehyde	8.60 ⁴²	8.611	8.542
135	adenine	8.264 ⁴⁹	8.294	8.260
145	3-hydroxyisoquinoline	8.028 ⁵⁰	8.08	8.065
149	9-methyl adenine	8.097 ⁵¹	8.121	8.079
151	paracetamol	7.57	7.66	7.682
152	acenaphthylene	8.12 ⁴²	8.006	7.985
154	acenaphthene	7.75 ⁴²	7.695	7.682
156	1-naphthaldehyde	8.43 ⁴²	8.452	8.396
165	Fluorenyl	7.07 ⁵²	7.10	-
166	fluorene	7.91 ⁴²	7.918	7.881
167	carbazole	7.57 ⁴²	7.695	7.661
168	dibenzofuran	8.12 ⁴⁶	8.175	8.095
178	anthracene	7.439 ⁴²	7.388	7.400
	phenanthrene	7.89 ⁴²	7.898	7.891
179	acridine	7.8 ⁴²	7.896	7.888
180	fluorenone	8.356 ⁵³	8.406	8.491
182	1,2-acenaphthenequinone	8.77 ⁴²	8.867	8.776
	benzophenone	8.923 ⁵³	8.94	-
184	dibenzothiophene	7.90 ⁴²	7.993	-
194	caffeine	7.95 ⁴²	8.077	7.998
196	xanthone	8.42 ⁴²	8.508	8.440
202	pyrene	7.43 ⁴²	7.431	7.396
	fluoranthene	7.90 ⁴²	7.896	7.868
218	benzo[b]naphtho[2,3-	7.64 ⁴⁶	7.673	7.632

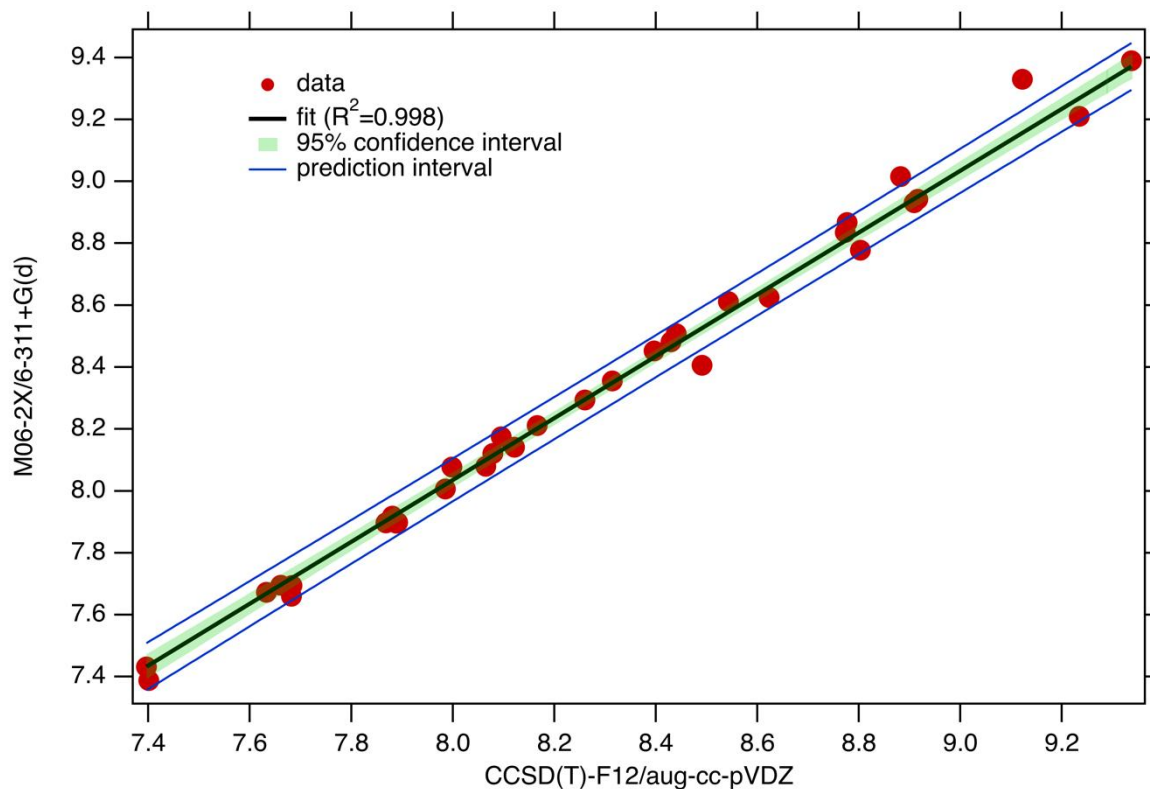
	d]furan			
228	triphenylene	7.87 ⁴²	7.892	-
	chrysene	7.60 ⁴²	7.585	-
	Benz[a]anthracene	7.45 ⁴²	7.391	-
252	perylene	6.96 ⁴²	6.965	-
	Benzo[a]pyrene	7.12 ⁴²	7.093	-
276	Benzo[ghi]perylene	7.17 ⁴²	7.171	-
278	pentacene	6.63 ⁴²	6.504	-
	Dibenz[a,h]anthracene	7.39 ⁴²	7.355	-
300	coronene	7.31 ⁵⁴	7.393	-
326	Dibenzo[b,pqr]perylene	7.12 ⁴²	7.206	-
350	Benzo[a]coronene	7.08 ⁴²	7.192	-
374	Dibenzo[bc,ef]coronene	6.50 ⁴²	6.521	-
398	ovalene	6.86 ⁴²	6.776	-
400	Dibenzo[a,j]coronene	6.92 ⁴²	7.007	-
666	circumcoronene	-	6.572	-
1,176	circumcircumcoronene	-	6.082	-

183

184

185 To verify the suitability of the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) method for calculating the AIEs of various PAHs
 186 and their substituted analogues, a specific investigation was conducted. Initially, the validity of this
 187 method was established by successfully calculating the AIE of naphthalene. Subsequently, in order to
 188 comprehensively explore the AIEs of a wide range of aromatic molecules, 54 PAHs and substituted
 189 analogues with masses ranging from 67 atomic mass unit (u) to 1,176 u (as detailed in Table 3) were
 190 subjected to AIE calculations using the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) method. These calculated AIE values
 191 were then compared to both the corresponding experimental values published in literature and the
 192 AIE values determined using the (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ method, which is considered as the
 193 reference method for AIE calculations.

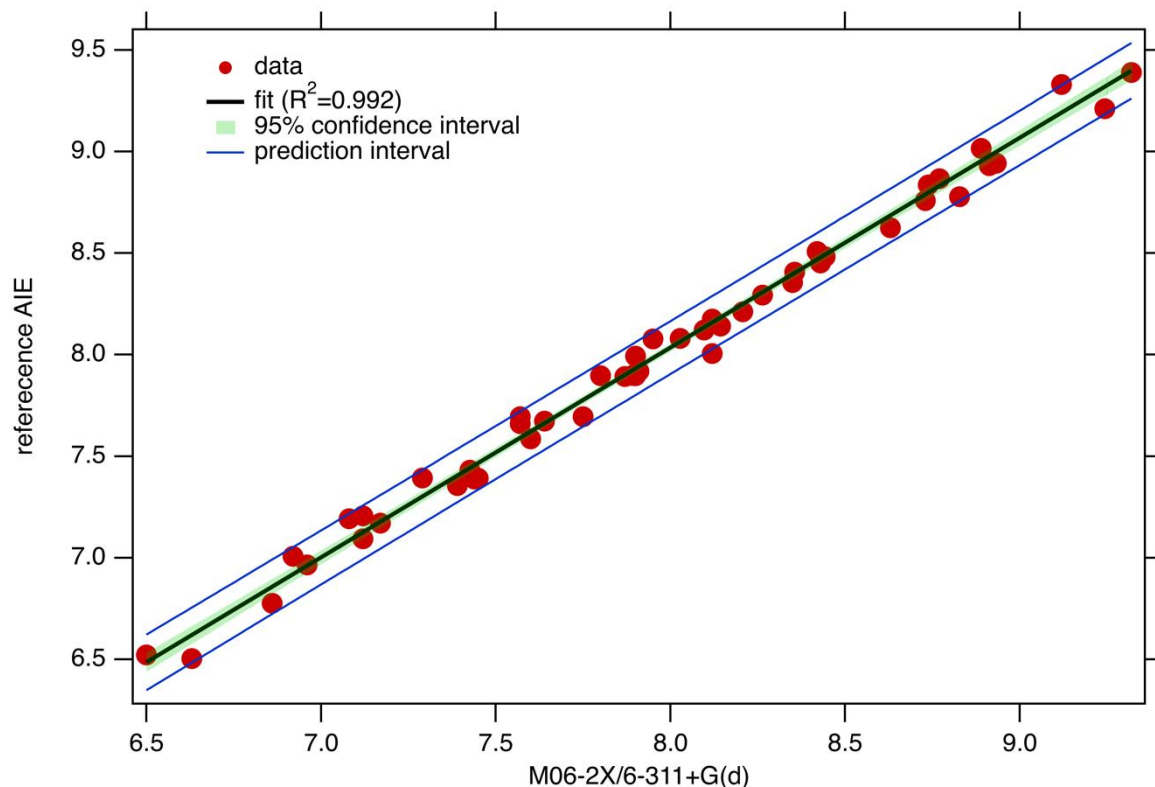
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195
 196 **Figure 2.** Plot of the calculated AIE for various PAHs and substituted analogues (as specified in Tables
 197 2 and 3) with M06-2X/6-311+G(d) as a function of the AIE calculated with (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-
 198 pVDZ. The black line corresponds to the linear regression of the data. The green area shows a
 199 confidence level to 95% and the blue line are prediction bands. The corresponding values are listed in
 200 Table 3.

201
 202 In Figure 2, a least-squares regression analysis is presented, showcasing the relationship between
 203 the two sets of AIE values calculated using the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) and (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ
 204 methods. Due to computational resource limitations, (R)CCSD(T)-F12 calculations were performed
 205 for molecules with molar masses up to 218 u. The high correlation coefficient ($R^2=0.998$) observed in
 206 these data demonstrates a strong correlation, reinforcing the trend observed for naphthalene. This
 207 finding indicates that the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) method is consistent and sufficiently reliable for
 208 predicting the AIEs of these molecules.

209



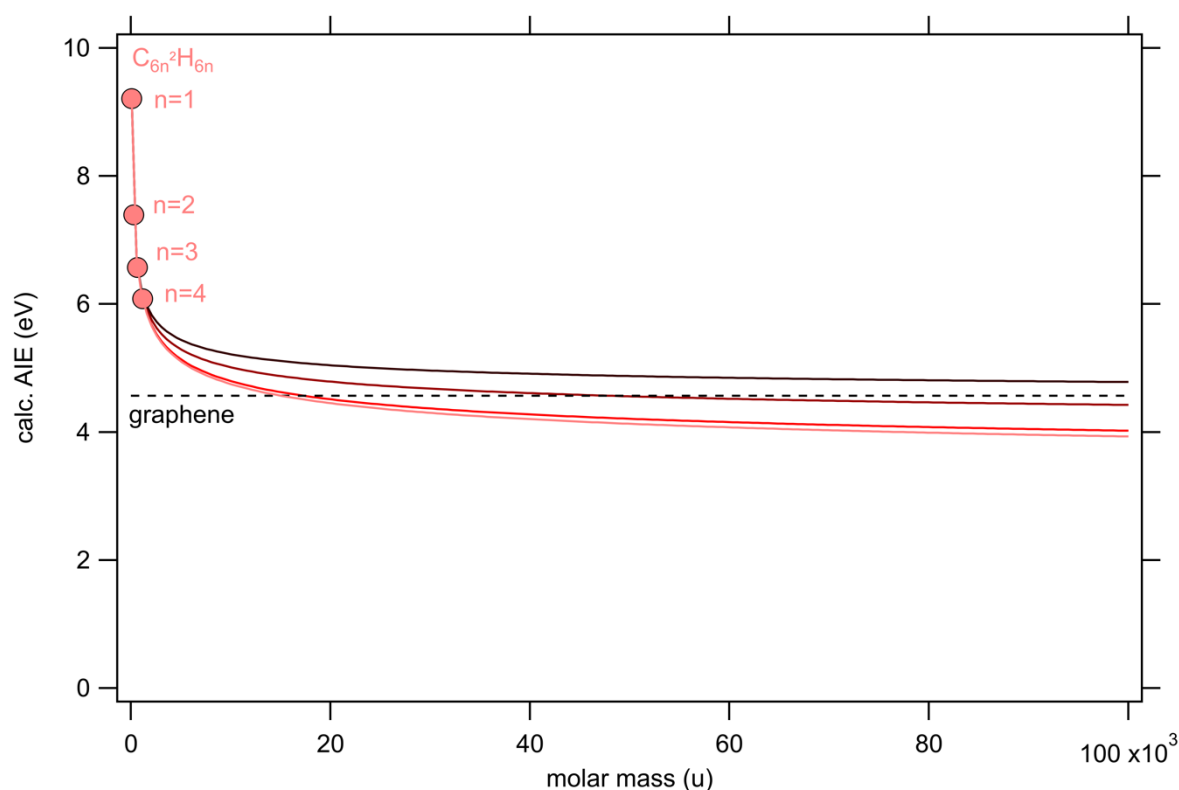
210
 211 **Figure 3.** Comparison between calculated AIEs with M06-2X/6-311+G(d) and reference AIEs from the
 212 literature for various PAHs and substituted analogues as specified in Tables 2 and 3.

213
 214 To further expand the range of tested molecules and validate the reliability of the method, the
 215 comparison between calculated AIEs using the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) method was extended to
 216 experimental values reported in the literature. This included data from high-resolution photoelectron
 217 photoion coincidence (PEPICO) spectroscopic studies (e.g., Laamiri et al.⁵¹ and Schleier et al.⁴⁸) as
 218 well as information available in the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) database.⁴²
 219 In this context, AIEs were calculated for 52 PAHs and substituted analogues, with molecular masses
 220 ranging from 67 u to 400 u, using the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) computational method as listed in Table 2.
 221 The molecular structures of these compounds consist of multiple fused benzene rings, with some
 222 containing heteroatoms such as nitrogen (N), oxygen (O), sulfur (S), and various functional groups (as
 223 detailed in Table 2). Figure 3 illustrates the least-squares regression analysis performed between the
 224 experimental AIE values and the corresponding ones calculated using M06-2X/6-311+G(d). A high
 225 correlation coefficient ($R^2=0.992$) is obtained, indicating a strong correlation between the predicted
 226 AIE values using M06-2X/6-311+G(d) and the reference values from the literature within the energy
 227 range of 6.5 – 9.4 eV. Once again, this result provides further support for the remarkable reliability of
 228 M06-2X/6-311+G(d) in predicting the AIEs of PAHs and substituted analogues, from relatively small
 229 molecular systems to very large structures.

230 Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate that the predictive accuracy of the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) approach is
231 valuable for distinguishing between structural isomers of PAHs, such as pyrene and fluoranthene
232 (m/z 202), which have a similar chemical formula ($C_{16}H_{10}$) but differ in molecular structure. This
233 structural distinction impacts the chemical and reactive properties of these compounds. The
234 application of this theoretical method in investigating the formation of such isomers in
235 photoionization experiments is highly significant for gaining insights into reaction
236 mechanisms and exploring structure-property relationships.⁵⁵

237 As shown in the case of fluorenyl (m/z 165) and fluorene (m/z 166), resonance-stabilized radicals are
238 also one of the target of interest for this method with a high accuracy/time ratio. These radicals are
239 expected to be involved in the formation of soot particles whose formation mechanisms remain
240 incomplete.¹⁰ The use of this theoretical method would thus benefit the photoionization experiments
241 used for the characterization of large persistent radicals in nascent soot as well as obtaining
242 structural information on the aromatic units.⁵⁶

243



244
245 **Figure 4.** Comparison between the calculated AIEs of $C_{6n}^2H_{6n}$ ($n = 1-4$) species (red dots) using the
246 M06-2X/6-311+G(d) method and a reference value the ionization energy of graphene (black dashed
247 line)⁵⁷. Different fit of the data using a power function is represented by colored solid lines. Further
248 information can be found in the text.

249

250 In order to provide predictive insights, AIE calculations were conducted using the benchmarked M06-
251 2X/6-311+G(d) method for larger PAH systems that lack literature values. The focus was on
252 investigating a specific group of coronene-derivative species with a general $C_{6n^2}H_{6n}$ molecular
253 formula. These compounds share a specific structural pattern characterized by the arrangement of
254 six carbon atoms forming cyclic, aromatic configurations. In this work, the number of these cyclic
255 units, denoted as n , was varied from 1 to 4 (C_6H_6 to $C_{96}H_{24}$), allowing for the exploration of a range of
256 compounds from benzene to more complex structures: coronene, circumcoronene, and
257 circumcircumcoronene. The AIEs obtained from calculations for coronene-derived species were
258 compared to a referenced ionization potential of graphene: 4.57 ± 0.05 eV.⁵⁷ The results, shown in
259 Figure 4, indicate that as the size of the PAHs increases, their AIEs approach the value of graphene.
260 This implies that the electrons become less tightly bound as the molecule size expands, indicating an
261 evolution in the electronic structure of the PAHs. This observation aligns with the expectations
262 derived from the Hückel simple model for such aromatic compounds. The fact that the ionization
263 energies of PAHs approach that of graphene upon extending the π -aromatic system suggests a
264 convergence of their electronic properties from molecules to extended 2D materials. This may
265 indicate that large-sized PAHs exhibit electronic properties close to those of graphene, which can be
266 important for potential applications such as the development of new PAH-based materials with
267 interesting electrical conduction properties. The graphene-like electronic properties could also be
268 useful in the design of electronic devices or in areas such as nanochemistry, nanotechnology,
269 catalysis and energy conversion.

270 The AIEs of $C_{6n^2}H_{6n}$ ($n = 1-4$) species were fitted and extrapolated using a power function with the
271 form $y_0 + A x^B$. In this equation, the constant term (y_0) should correspond to the theoretical AIE of
272 graphene. Figure 4 presents four fits using different values for the larger masses, resulting in
273 significant variations in the y_0 term and on the B power in this fitting function. This discrepancy
274 arises because the calculated AIEs data primarily fall within the repulsive region of the fit rather than
275 the convergent flat part. Accordingly, even when considering a PAH greater than 1,000 u, the AIE
276 values remain considerably distant from that of graphene. Consequently, these species cannot be
277 considered as substitutes for graphene in terms of their physico-chemical properties.

278 Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the differences between the reference value of
279 graphene and the AIE values of PAHs could also be attributed to the presence of Jahn-Teller (JT)
280 distortions in the cationic structures of PAHs. Similar to coronene, as discussed in Tampieri et al.⁵⁸,
281 both circumcoronene and circumcircumcoronene have highly symmetric neutral ground states with
282 doubly degenerate HOMOs and LUMOs. When one electron is removed to form a cation, the partially
283 filled degenerate molecular orbitals lead to an electronic instability. Consequently, this cation
284 undergoes structural relaxation to minimize this instability. This relaxation manifests as a geometric

285 distortion, breaking the molecular symmetry and reducing the energy of the system. In this work, by
286 considering the changes in bond length between the ionic and neutral forms, the relative elongation
287 and restriction of the bond lengths are found to be consistent across different-sized PAHs but the
288 overall extent of the changes diminishes as the molecules become larger.

289 To summarize this work shows that M06-2X outperforms the common DFT methods in predicting the
290 AIEs of PAHs and substituted analogues. For those specific molecular systems, the level of accuracy
291 of M06-2X is comparable to the highly accurate (R)CCSD(T)-F12 which is time consuming as the size
292 of the molecular system increases. Comparison with existing AIE values from the literature shows
293 that the M06-2X is also able to accurately predict the AIEs of large aromatic molecular systems. In
294 this work the bigger structures whose AIE has been calculated includes 37 fused benzene rings and
295 96 carbon atoms. Such accuracy from M06-2X is mainly related to the large quantity of HF exchange
296 that this DFT contains compared to other DFTs. Another important aspect might also be the Rydberg
297 character of certain excited states of PAHs which are highly excited electronic states with diffuse
298 electron densities.⁵⁹ M06-2X has been designed to describe diffuse wave functions which could
299 potentially make it suitable for accurately predicting properties associated with Rydberg-like states.⁶⁰

300 This finding suggests that M06-2X, with the recommendation of a proper basis set, is a reliable and
301 efficient method to be used in conjunction with experimental techniques for gaining a
302 comprehensive understanding of the electronic properties of PAHs and related molecules.
303 Particularly the low-lying Rydberg states, are not yet fully understood despite extensive research as
304 the lowest members of the Rydberg series can deviate from pure Rydberg states due to the proximity
305 to the molecular core. This results in mixing with valence states of similar energy, leading to complex
306 electronic structures and spectroscopic features, are of considerable interest for combustion,
307 atmospheric, molecular electronics⁶¹ and astrochemistry⁶².

308 The set of molecules that was used to confront the predictions of M06-2X in this work includes PAHs
309 with hetero-atoms that can be formed from biofuels or constitute nucleic acid bases. Thus having
310 calculated AIEs to be able to identify those species in photoionization experiments using either
311 coincidence detection schemes and mass spectrometry could be of great interest with many
312 applications. Accurate calculation of AIEs for PAHs and their substituted analogues is important for
313 understanding their electronic properties, predicting their reactivity and stability, designing
314 functional materials, and evaluating their environmental and health implications. Since nucleobases
315 (NBs) are the building blocks of both ribonucleic (RNA) and deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), calculating
316 the AIE of NBs is important for understanding the stability and reactivity of RNA and DNA, predicting
317 DNA damage, studying DNA repair mechanisms, and aiding in drug design and development targeting
318 nucleic acids. However, it is important to note that the accuracy and reliability of any computational
319 method, including M06-2X, depend on the specific system being studied and the desired level of

320 accuracy. It is always prudent to validate the results of any computational method against
321 experimental data or higher-level calculations to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

322

323 **COMPUTATIONAL METHODS**

324 All electronic structure and energy computations were performed using GAUSSIAN09⁶³ and
325 MOLPRO⁶⁴ suites of *ab initio* programs. To compute AIEs, full structure optimizations on neutral and
326 cationic species were carried out using tight convergence criteria and by formally lowering the
327 symmetry in the calculations (i.e. in C_1 point group). The optimized structure of the neutral species
328 was used as the initial structure for the cationic forms. DFT and composite methods computations
329 include full geometry optimizations and zero-point energy (ΔZPE) correction. Coupled clusters
330 methods, (R)CCSD(T)/CBS and (R)CCSD(T)-F12/aug-cc-pVDZ, as implemented in MOLPRO, were used
331 for single point computations on top of the optimized neutral and cationic structures as determined
332 by M06-2X/6-311+G(d). For the respective AIEs, we also used the ΔZPE , and frequencies as calculated
333 at the M06-2X/6-311+G(d) level of theory. Only for the biggest species calculated in this work, $C_{96}H_{24}$,
334 the ΔZPE was derived from frequency calculations at the M06-2X/6-31G(d) level of theory after
335 optimization. The CCSD(T)/CBS energies were extrapolated from CCSD(T)/cc-pVDZ, and CCSD(T)/cc-
336 pVTZ energies using the scheme suggested by Martin⁶⁵ and Feller and Dixon⁶⁶.

337

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352 **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

353 This work was performed using HPC resources from GENCI-IDRIS (Grant 2023-AD010814091) and the
354 EXPLOR centre hosted by the University of Lorraine (Project: 2021EXTXX2356). The authors extend

355 their appreciation to the Researchers supporting project number (RSPD2023R808) King Saud
356 University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The authors thank Prof. C. Adamo (France) for engaging in fruitful
357 discussions.
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