Charge regulation: A generalized boundary condition?

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received 19 October 2015; accepted in final form 29 January 2016
published online 18 February 2016

PACS 61.20.Qg – Structure of associated liquids: electrolytes, molten salts, etc.
PACS 82.45.Gj – Electrolytes
PACS 05.20.-y – Classical statistical mechanics

Abstract – The three most commonly used boundary conditions for charged colloidal systems are constant charge (insulator), constant potential (conducting electrode) and charge regulation (ionizable groups at the surface). It is usually believed that the charge regulation is a generalized boundary condition that reduces in some specific limits to either constant-charge or constant-potential boundary conditions. By computing the disjoining pressure between two symmetric planes for these three boundary conditions, both numerically (for all inter-plate separations) and analytically (for small inter-plate separations), we show that this is not, in general, the case. In fact, the limit of charge regulation is a separate boundary condition, yielding a disjoining pressure with a different characteristic separation scaling. Our findings are supported by several examples demonstrating that the disjoining pressure at small separations for the charge regulation boundary condition depends on the details of the dissociation/association process.

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Introduction. – Charge colloidal particles do not usually conform to the simple and popular idea that they can be characterized either as insulators with fixed surface charges or conductors with constant surface potential [1]. In fact, when two colloidal particles with ionizable surface groups (immersed in an aqueous electrolyte solution) are brought together, both their surface charge density and surface electrostatic potential change with the particle (surface) inter-distance [2,3]. This ubiquitous phenomenon stems from the dissociation/association of surface ionizable groups and is referred to as charge regulation (CR). It was elegantly formalized within the Poisson-Boltzmann (PB) theory of electrostatic interactions by Ninham and Parsegian in the 1970s [4].

The CR formalism can be implemented equivalently either through a chemical dissociation equilibrium of surface binding sites (law of mass action) [5–8], or through a surface-site partition function (free energy) [9–15]. In both cases, it yields the same self-consistent boundary condition for an effective surface-charge density that differs from the boundary condition of constant charge (CC) for charged insulators or constant potential (CP) for conducting surfaces. The concept of charge regulation has been widely applied in different situations: analysis of the stability of the electrostatic double-layer and its relation to inter-surface forces [16,17], dissociation of amino acids and protein interactions [18–20], charge regulation in protein aggregates such as viral shells [21] and polyelectrolytes and polyelectrolyte brushes [22–25], as well as for charged membranes [26–28].

Although the theory of charge-regulated electrostatic interactions has been previously used in numerous situations, some conceptually important issues have not been addressed with sufficient generality. Usually, the CR disjoining pressure, $\Pi_{\text{CR}}$, is bounded by those stemming from the CC and CP boundary conditions [29] (for some exceptions, see, e.g., refs. [30,31]). However, this does not imply that, in general, the expression of $\Pi_{\text{CR}}(d)$ as a function of the inter-plate separation, $d$, will properly reduce to the two implied limits.

In this letter, we show on general grounds that the disjoining pressure, $\Pi_{\text{CR}}(d)$, based on the CR boundary condition has scaling properties in the limit of small inter-plate separations, which differ from the scaling behavior of the CC or CP boundary conditions.

Model. – Consider an ionic solution that contains monovalent symmetric (1:1) salt of charge $\pm e$ of bulk...
concentration $n_b$, immersed in aqueous solvent between two symmetric plates separated by the distance $d$, and of infinite lateral extent, as depicted in fig. 1. We consider three types of boundary conditions: constant charge (CC), constant potential (CP) and charge regulation (CR). The water solvent is assumed to be a continuum dielectric medium characterized by the water dielectric constant, $\varepsilon_w$. We choose for convenience to locate the two planes at $z = \pm d/2$ such that $z = 0$ is a symmetry plane. Thus, the electrostatic potential is symmetric about the mid-plane, yielding a zero electric field, $E_m \propto \psi'_m = 0$ at $z = 0$.

The equation that governs the distribution of mobile ions in solution at finite temperature is the well-known Poisson-Boltzmann (PB) equation (for details see ref. [32]). For 1:1 monovalent salts it has the simple form

$$\frac{d^2 \psi}{dz^2} = \kappa_D^2 \sinh \psi(z), \quad (1)$$

where $\psi$ is redefined as a dimensionless electrostatic potential $(e\psi/k_B T \rightarrow \psi)$ and $\lambda_D = \kappa_D^{-1} = (8\pi e^2 n_b/\varepsilon_w k_B T)^{-1/2}$ is the Debye length in Gaussian units, with $k_B$ the Boltzmann constant and $T$ the temperature. The one-dimensional PB equation is obtained by taking into account the translation symmetry in the $x$-$y$ plane.

The solution of the one-dimensional PB equation can be expressed in terms of elliptic functions. Exploiting the symmetry of the system, it is then sufficient to consider the interval $[0, d/2]$, with $\psi'_m = 0$ at $z = 0$ mid-plane. The general solution in such a symmetric setup can be written in terms of the Jacobi elliptic function [32,33], $cd(u|a^2)$, as

$$\psi = \psi_m + 2 \ln \left[ \frac{cd}{2a \sqrt{m}} \left( \frac{m}{2 \lambda_D \sqrt{m}} \right) \right], \quad (2)$$

with $m \equiv \exp(\psi_m)$ and $\psi_m \equiv \psi(z = 0)$. The additional boundary condition at $z = d/2$ will determine a different $\psi_m$ for the three different cases: CC, CP, and CR at finite $d$. Evaluating the above equation and considering the boundary condition at $z = d/2$ result in an explicit relation $\sigma = \sigma(\psi_m; d)$ between the surface charge density, $\sigma$, the surface potential $\psi_s$ and $d$. In order to understand how the three boundary conditions differ and when they indeed merge, we use the general expression for the disjoining pressure, which is valid in all three cases (CC, CP and CR) as explained in ref. [34],

$$\Pi(d) = 4k_B T n_b \sinh^2(\psi_m/2) > 0. \quad (3)$$

This pressure is a macroscopic measurable quantity that strongly depends on the inter-plane separation, $d$.

The difference in the disjoining pressure for the three boundary conditions becomes substantial only for relatively small separations, $d \lesssim \lambda_D$, while in the large-separation limit, $d \gg \lambda_D$, the three pressure expressions coincide. To gain further insight into the different behavior of the disjoining pressure, we focus on the small-separation limit, $d \ll \lambda_D$ and $d \ll \ell_{GC}$, where $\ell_{GC} \equiv e/(2\pi \ell_B |\sigma|)$ is the Gouy-Chapman length and $\ell_B = e^2/\varepsilon_w k_B T$ is the Bjerrum length in Gaussian units. Our analytical results give the scaling of $\Pi$ with $d$ and clearly distinguish between the three boundary conditions.

Let us start with the most common CC boundary condition,

$$\psi \bigg|_{z=d/2} \equiv \psi'_s = 4\pi \ell_B \sigma/e. \quad (4)$$

Equations (2) and (4) give a relation between the surface charge density $\sigma$, the mid-plane potential $\psi_m$ and $d$, in terms of the Jacobi elliptic functions [32,33],

$$\sigma/e = \frac{\kappa_D}{4\pi \ell_B} \frac{m^2 - 1}{\sqrt{m}} \frac{\text{sn}(u_s|m^2)}{\text{cn}(u_s|m^2) \text{dn}(u_s|m^2)} \quad (5)$$

with $u_s \equiv d/(4\lambda_D \sqrt{m})$ and $m \equiv \exp(\psi_m)$ as defined above. For fixed surface charge, this relation gives the mid-plane potential, $\psi_m$. Then, the disjoining pressure can be calculated from eq. (3). When $d$ is the smallest length scale in the system, it can be shown that the disjoining pressure in the so-called ideal-gas regime [32,35,36] scales as

$$\Pi_{CC} \simeq \frac{k_B T}{\pi \ell_B \ell_{GC}} \frac{1}{d} \sim d^{-1}. \quad (6)$$

The density (per unit volume) of the counterions is almost constant between the two charged plates and is equal to $2|\sigma|/(ed)$. This counterion density neutralizes the surface charge density, $\sigma$, and the main contribution to the pressure comes from the entropy of an ideal-gas behavior of the counterion cloud.

In the second case of a CP boundary condition, $\psi_s$ is fixed, and unlike the CC case, here the counterion concentration remains constant near each of the planes, as it uniquely depends on the value of the surface potential, $\psi_s$, through the Boltzmann factor [37]. The corresponding surface charge density, $\sigma$, is proportional to $d$ at small separation, $\sigma \sim d$. Therefore, it vanishes for $d \rightarrow 0$. Using the Taylor expansion of elliptic functions [33], one can evaluate the leading terms in the surface potential for small $d$ as

$$\psi_s \simeq \psi_m - (1 - m^2) u_s^2. \quad (7)$$
Substituting the above equation into the disjoining pressure expression, eq. (3), yields to second order in $d$,
\[
\Pi_{CP} \simeq k_B T n_b \left(4 \sinh^2(\psi_s/2) - \sinh^2(\psi_s)(k_Dd)^2/8\right) \\
\simeq \text{const} + O(d^2).
\] (8)

The above equation shows that the disjoining pressure for the CP boundary condition goes to a constant value, $\Pi_0$, for vanishing inter-plate separation, $d \to 0$, with a leading correction term proportional to $d^2$.

**Single-site process.** – As an example of a CR boundary condition, we consider a surface that is composed of ionizable groups (e.g., charged phospholipids). Each group can release a counterion into the solution in a single-site dissociation process. We first focus on such single-site CR dissociation process and refer to it as CR$_1$. It is the simplest and most common CR process, and it will be extended below to multi-site processes. The surface dissociation/association can be described by the reaction
\[
A^+ + B^- \rightleftharpoons AB,
\] (9)
where $A$ denotes a surface site that can be either ionized ($A^+$) or neutral (AB). The process of dissociation/association is characterized by an equilibrium constant $K_d$ through the law of mass action
\[
K_d = \frac{[A^+][B^-]}{[AB]},
\] (10)
where $[A^+]$, $[B^-]$, and $[AB]$ denote the three corresponding surface concentrations. The equilibrium condition of eq. (10) can be written in terms of $\phi_s \equiv \sigma(\psi_s) a^2/e \sim [A^+]$,
\[
\phi_s = \frac{1}{1 + \phi_b e^{-\alpha + \psi_s}} = \frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2} \tanh (\ln \phi_b - \alpha + \psi_s)/2, \tag{11}
\]
where $a^3$ is the ion volume, $\phi_b = a^3 n_b$ is the ionic volume fraction and we have introduced a surface interaction parameter $\alpha = \ln(a^3 K_d)$. From $\sigma(\psi_s)$, eq. (5) and eq. (7) one obtains explicitly $\psi_m$. By using the Taylor expansion of elliptic functions [33] in eqs. (5) and (11), it is clear that as $d \to 0$, $m$ diverges, but this divergence is weaker than $d^{-1}$. It yields a diverging CR$_1$ disjoining pressure for small $d$,
\[
\Pi_{CR}^{(1)} \simeq \sqrt{2k_B T} e^{-\phi_b/2} \rho_{\alpha}^{-5/2} d^{-1/2} \sim d^{-1/2},
\] (12)
where the superscript in $\Pi_{CR}^{(1)}$ indicates that it corresponds to a CR$_1$ process. Note that just like $\Pi_{CP}$, $\Pi_{CR}^{(1)}$ does not depend on the bulk salt concentration, $n_b$.

Another possible single-site process is the process of charging a neutral surface,
\[
A + B^+ \rightleftharpoons AB^+.
\] (13)

Note that eq. (14) reduces to eq. (11) for the mapping: $\phi_s \to 1 - \phi_s$ and $\psi_s \to -\psi_s$. Repeating the same procedure as above, we obtain a somewhat different disjoining pressure,
\[
\Pi_{CR}^{(1)} \simeq \sqrt{2k_B T} e^{-\phi_b/2} a^{1/2} d^{-1/2} \sim d^{-1/2},
\] (15)
which also diverges as $d^{-1/2}$ but with a different prefactor that is linear in the bulk concentration. Note that these results do not depend on the sign of the surface site.

A typical pressure isotherm, $\Pi(d)$, is computed numerically for the CR$_1$ process of eq. (9) and is shown in fig. 2. The mid-plane potential, $\psi_m$, is obtained as a function of inter-membrane separation, $d/\lambda_D$, using eqs. (2), (5) and (11). The pressure is calculated via eq. (3) and the surface potential from eq. (2). From the extrapolation of the surface potential value at large inter-plate separations, we obtain the surface potential and the surface charge for CP and CC, respectively. The three pressure isotherms
obey the inequality: \( \Pi_{\text{CC}} \geq \Pi_{\text{CR}} \geq \Pi_{\text{CP}} \). This is a general inequality that holds for charge regulations consisting of single-site dissociation process. The log-log plot in fig. 2 clearly shows the distinct \( d^{-1/2} \) scaling for CR1, confirming our analytical results, eqs. (12) and (15).

An additional interesting observation can be made for the vanishing inter-plate separation, \( d \to 0 \). The results for \( \Pi_{\text{CR}}^{(1)}(d \to 0) \) can be obtained from \( \Pi_{\text{CC}}(d \to 0) \) of eq. (6) by substituting the surface charge, \( \sigma(d) \), for the single-site process into the Gouy-Chapman length. This shows a resemblance of the CR1 and CC processes, and gives some insight to the understanding of the different \( \Pi_{\text{CR}}^{(1)} \) scalings. The \( \Pi_{\text{CR}}^{(1)} \) divergence is due to counterions that are bounded between the planes and neutralize the surface charge, as in the CC case. However, the surface charge itself is not constant but decreases with \( d \) as explained above. Namely, some of the counterions adsorb onto the surface in order to neutralize it. Therefore, less counterions are bounded between the planes and the entropic penalty is reduced, as compared to the CC case.

The CR scaling results differ substantially from the disjoining pressure of the CC (\( \Pi_{\text{CC}} \sim 1/d \))as well as CP (\( \Pi_{\text{CP}} \sim \text{const} \)) boundary conditions. There is a fundamental difference between the three boundary conditions, making it clear that the disjoining-pressure scaling for small separations for the CC and CP boundary conditions cannot be obtained by any limiting behavior of the CR boundary condition.

In previous works on charge regulation \([2,3,30,38,39]\), based on the same dissociation model, additional approximations were used, including linearization of the CR boundary condition or linearization of the PB equation. In these works, it has been shown that CR can reduce to boundary condition or linearization of the PB equation. An additional approximation was used, including linearization of the CR based on the same dissociation model, additional approximations.

Small separations for the CC and CP boundary conditions cannot make it clear that the disjoining-pressure scaling for CR itself is not constant but decreases with \( d \).



\[ \Pi_{\text{CR}}^{(2)} \approx \frac{1}{\mbar} \left( m_0 - 1 \right)^2 \left[ 1 - d \cdot \frac{m_0 \alpha^2}{2} \frac{p(m_0 + 1)^2}{(1 - p)(2p - 1)m_0} \right] \]

\[ \approx \Pi_0 - \Pi_1 d, \]

where \( m = m_0 + m_1 d + \ldots \), and

\[ m_0 = \frac{2p - 1}{1 - p} \frac{m_0 \alpha^2 e^{-\alpha}}{1} \]

is the first term in the expansion of \( m = \exp(\psi_m) \) in powers of \( d \). This result is similar to the CP result as the disjoining pressure goes to a constant value for \( d \to 0 \), but the first correction in CR2 is linear in \( d \), unlike the first CP correction that scales as \( d^2 \). This pressure expression is valid for \( 0.5 < p < 1 \), while for \( p \to 1/2, \Pi_{\text{CR}}^{(2)} \sim d^{-1/2} \) as for the CR1 case. For smaller \( 0 < p < 0.5 \), there are always some fixed surface charges and the pressure expression for \( d \to 0 \) reduces to the one of CC, eq. (6), with \( \sigma'/e = 1 - 2p \).

A typical pressure isotherm, \( \Pi(d) \), is computed numerically for the CR1 process and is shown in fig. 3. The calculation is exactly the same as for fig. 2, but instead

\[ A_1 + B_1^+ \rightleftharpoons A_1 B_1^+, \]

\[ A_2 + B_2^- \rightleftharpoons A_2 B_2^-, \]

where \( A_{1,2} \) are two different surface binding sites. A specific example for two dissociation processes can be [40]

\[ A_1 H + H^+ \rightleftharpoons A_1 H_1^+, \]

\[ A_2 H + OH^- \rightleftharpoons A_2 H_2^- + H_2O. \]
of eq. (11), we use eq. (19), which corresponds to the CR boundary condition. The log-log plot (inset) clearly shows that \( \Pi(d) \) tends towards a constant value, \( \Pi_0 \), as \( d \to 0 \), with a constant negative slope, \(-\Pi_1\) (dot-dashed thin black line), as derived in eq. (20).

The same calculation can be performed for any multi-site dissociation processes \( \text{CR}_{n \geq 2} \). It can be shown that \( \Pi^{(n \geq 2)}_{\text{CR}}(d \to 0) \approx C_0^{(n)} - C_1^{(n)}d \), where \( C_0^{(n)} \) and \( C_1^{(n)} \) are the two coefficients in the small-\( d \) expansion, whose value depends on \( n \geq 2 \). The value of \( \sigma_0 \) also depends on \( n \geq 2 \) and is determined by examining the vanishing \( \phi_a \) limit in the equilibrium condition (eq. (18) for the CR dissociation process). This pressure scaling is a result of the competition between the two (or more) dissociation/association processes of anions and cations. Unlike the CC and CR cases, where counterions have to stay bounded between the planes to neutralize the surface charge, in the multi-site process the planes are neutralized by the two (or more) competing processes. Therefore, no counterions remain between the plane and there is no entropic penalty.

**Conclusions.** – In this letter, we have shown that the CR boundary condition implies a much richer behavior than just an interpolation between the limiting forms of the CC and CP boundary conditions. Our conclusions are based on the full non-linear PB equation, as well as the non-linear form of the charge regulation conditions. They differ from previous claims that are based on linearization schemes [2,3,30,38,39].

We have shown that for both single-site (CR\(_1\)) and multi-site (CR\(_{n \geq 2}\)) surface dissociation/association processes the disjoining pressure is indeed bounded by the CC and CP limits, while its scaling for small separations depends on the process type and, generally, is at odds with both the CC and CP limiting cases. This is clear from the different scaling of the single-site process (CR\(_1\)), \( \Pi^{(1)}_{\text{CR}} \) that scales as \( d^{-1/2} \), while \( \Pi_{\text{CC}} \) scales as \( d^{-1} \) and \( \Pi_{\text{CP}} \) tends to a constant. We note that all considered boundary conditions lead to an identical (universal) separation scaling for large \( d \).

The single-site case is more similar to the CC boundary condition as it diverges for small separations. As was explained above, the pressure isotherm, \( \Pi^{(1)}_{\text{CR}} \), can be obtained by substituting the surface charge density, \( \sigma(d) \), into the Gouy-Chapman length of the disjoining pressure expression, \( \Pi_{\text{CC}} \) of eq. (6), for small \( d \). Furthermore, for multi-site dissociation processes, we have shown that \( \Pi^{(n \geq 2)}_{\text{CR}}(n \geq 2) \) is similar to the CP case, as it tends towards a constant value for small separations, \( \Pi^{(n \geq 2)}_{\text{CR}} \approx C_0^{(n)} - C_1^{(n)}d \). Nevertheless, as is apparent from its negative slope at \( d = 0 \), it differs from the CP case whose slope is zero.

In summary, the CR process is shown to be a distinct type of boundary condition with particular scaling behavior, and cannot be considered as a generalization of the CC and CP cases. One should also keep in mind the fundamental difference between the CR single-site process and the multi-site ones.

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