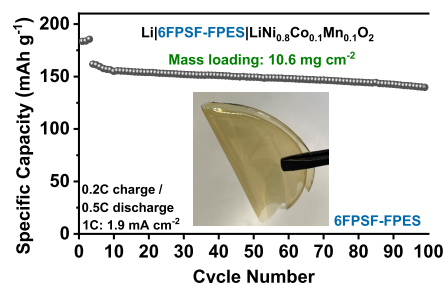


Single-Ion Conducting Multi-block Copolymer Electrolyte for Lithium-Metal Batteries with High Mass Loading NCM₈₁₁ Cathodes

Xu Dong, Alexander Mayer, Xu Liu, Stefano Passerini,* and Dominic Bresser*

ABSTRACT: Lithium-metal batteries comprising a single-ion conducting polymer electrolyte and a nickel-rich LiNi_{1-x-y}Co_xMn_yO₂ (NCM) positive electrode (cathode) potentially offer very high energy density and great safety. However, such cell chemistry is very demanding concerning the required interfacial stability of the polymer electrolyte, and the realization of high mass loading cathodes remains a great challenge. Herein, the development of a new single-ion conducting multi-block copolymer electrolyte including trifluoromethyl groups in the ionophilic block is reported. After ethylene carbonate (EC) is incorporated into the self-standing and easily processable polymer membranes, high ionic conductivity along with very high limiting current density and suitable anodic stability are obtained. These enable stable cycling of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells—also at high C rates (up to 5C) and active material mass loadings of the NCM₈₁₁ cathode of >10 mg cm⁻², which are both key steps toward the potential commercialization of this class of electrolytes.



Worldwide concerns about climate change are motivating the development of green energy technologies, including high-performance batteries to allow for the efficient storage of renewable energy.^{1–4} To further increase the energy density of lithium batteries, the use of metallic lithium for the negative electrode is considered a key step in the near-term to mid-term future, owing to its high theoretical capacity of 3,860 mAh g⁻¹ and very low redox potential of -3.04 V vs the standard hydrogen electrode (SHE).^{5–10} The transition from lithium-ion to lithium-metal batteries (LMBs), however, requires the replacement of the commonly used, highly flammable liquid electrolytes (i.e., solutions of LiPF₆ in organic carbonates), as they do not form a long-term stable interphase with lithium metal.^{11–19}

Polymer electrolytes (PEs) are a potential alternative, offering greater safety combined with a rather easy processability and handling.^{20–24} The most investigated class of PEs is poly(ethylene oxide) (PEO) comprising a lithium salt, which was reported first by Wright and co-workers in 1973.²⁵ Such systems, however, suffer from the mobility of both ionic species—the cation and anion. The latter is frequently more mobile, which results in a relatively low lithium-ion transference number (t_{Li^+}), causing the formation of reversed concentration gradients upon cycling.^{26–29} This characteristic, together with the limited ionic conductivity at ambient temperature^{20,27,30} and the poor electrochemical stability toward elevated potentials beyond 3.8 V,^{31–33} hinders

their use in combination with high-voltage cathode materials such as LiNi_{0.8}Co_{0.1}Mn_{0.1}O₂ (NCM₈₁₁). To address these challenges, the design of high-performance single-ion conducting polymer electrolytes (SIPEs)^{18,34–42} with the anionic group covalently tethered to the polymer backbone was proposed. This enables a t_{Li^+} close to unity, which helps to suppress dendritic lithium deposition.^{35,43–45}

Following our previous findings that revealed a beneficial impact of trifluoromethyl groups on the electrochemical stability in Li||NCM cells,⁴⁶ we introduced this moiety in the earlier reported polyarylene-based multi-block copolymer electrolyte (Figure 1a), hereinafter referred to as 6FSPF-FPES.^{37,41,47,48} The resulting SIPE provides high ionic conductivity, limiting current density, and electrochemical stability. Moreover, its incorporation in the NCM₈₁₁ electrode enables the realization of high mass loading cathodes, showing stable cycling at reasonable discharge/charge rates for 100 cycles. To the best of our knowledge, this is the highest cathode mass loading reported so far in combination with SIPEs.

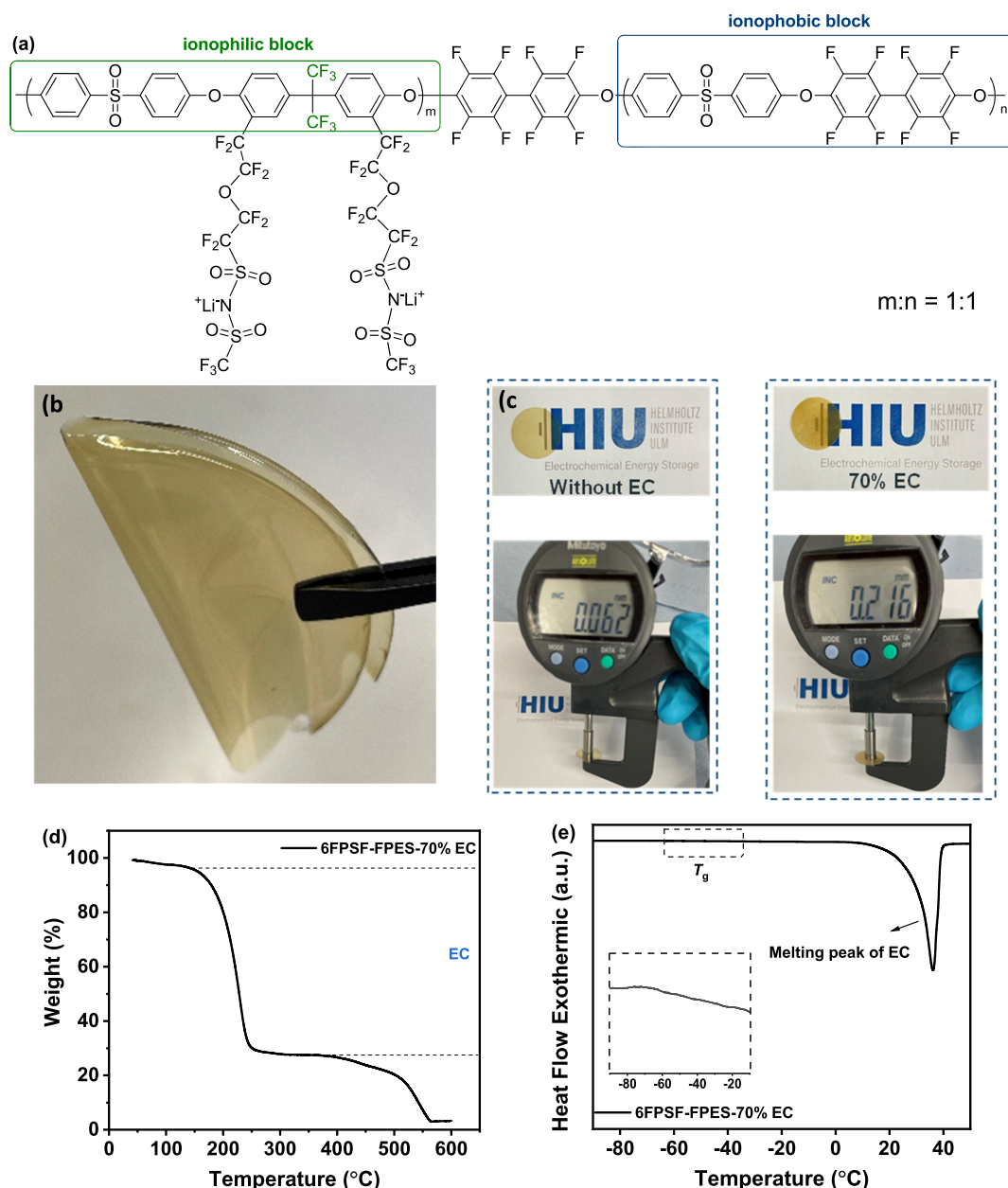


Figure 1. (a) Chemical structure of the 6FPSF-FPES ionomer. (b) Photograph of the 6FPSF-FPES membrane obtained by solvent-casting. (c) Photographs documenting the determination of the thicknesses of the readily punched membranes before and after incorporation of EC. (d) TGA data recorded for 6FPSF-FPES-70% EC. (e) DSC curve recorded for 6FPSF-FPES-70% EC (2nd cycle heating).

The molecular structure of 6FPSF-FPES is given in Figure 1a, with the trifluoromethyl groups in the ionophilic part of the polymer backbone highlighted in green. The synthesis is described in detail in the Supporting Information, along with basic characterization via ^1H NMR and ^{19}F NMR spectroscopy (Figures S1–S3), gel permeation chromatography (GPC; Table S1), and FT-IR spectroscopy (Figure S4). Solvent casting of the ionomer yields transparent, self-standing, and flexible membranes (Figure 1b). Subsequently, circular membranes with a diameter of 15 mm were punched and soaked with 70 wt% ethylene carbonate (EC), which results in a significant increase in thickness from about 62 to 216 μm (Figure 1c). The thermal stability of these soaked membranes was evaluated by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA; Figure 1d). The mass loss from 150 to 250 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ is attributed to the evaporation of EC (see also Figure S5 for the TGA of EC only

for comparison). The ionomer itself is stable until about 350 $^{\circ}\text{C}$, which makes it very suitable for practical application in LMBs. The differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) plot (Figure 1e) exhibits a sharp endothermic peak (onset temperature: 29.8 $^{\circ}\text{C}$; peak temperature: 36.1 $^{\circ}\text{C}$) due to the melting of EC and a glass transition at around -26.3 $^{\circ}\text{C}$, which is in very good agreement with previous findings for the ionophilic block.³⁷ The mechanical properties of the EC-containing ionomer beyond the melting point of EC are qualitatively displayed in Video S1.

The electrochemical properties of the 70 wt% EC-containing ionomer membranes were also investigated (Figure 2). The temperature-dependent ionic conductivity is shown in Figure 2a. At 30 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ the ionic conductivity is relatively low, but it substantially increases at 40 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ and beyond owing to the melting of EC between these two temperatures. In fact, at 40

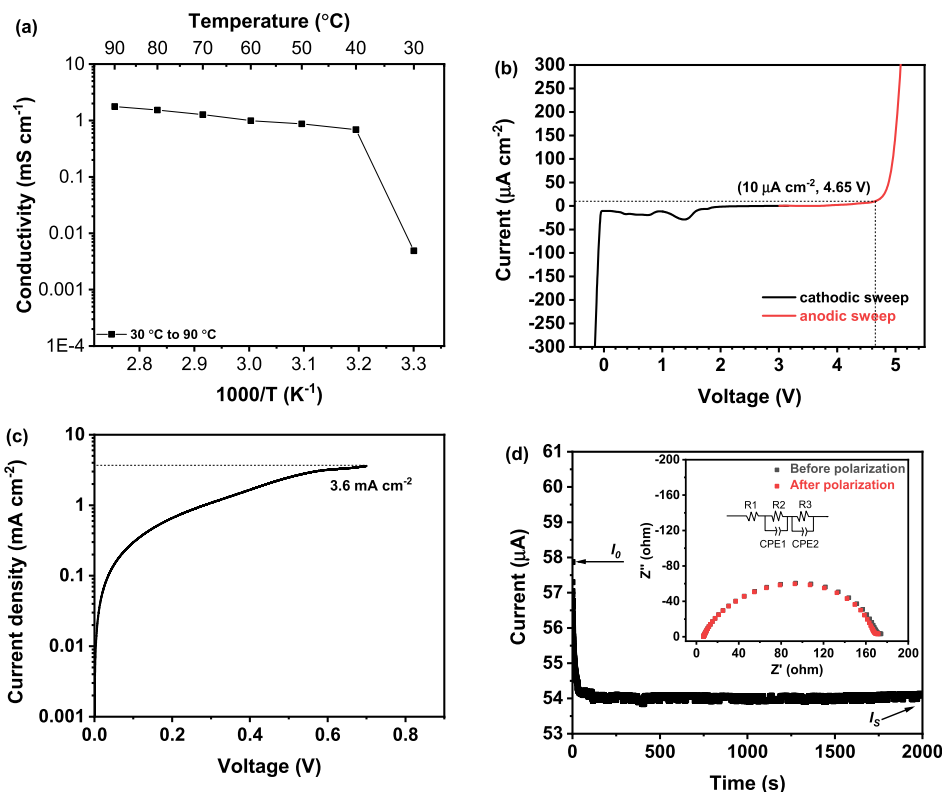


Figure 2. (a) Ionic conductivity of 6FPSF-FPES-70% EC as a function of temperature. Determination of (b) the electrochemical stability via LSV (Li||Ni cells; sweep rate: 1.0 mV s⁻¹; 40 °C) and (c) the limiting current density (Li||Li cells; sweep rate: 0.02 mV s⁻¹; 40 °C). (d) Plot of the resulting current after a voltage of 10 mV is applied to the cell, with an indication of the current values used for the calculation of the Li⁺ transference number; as inset the corresponding Nyquist plots for the EIS measurements before and after polarization are shown.

°C the conductivity is as high as 0.69 mS cm⁻¹ (see Table S2 and Figure S6 for a comparison of the ionic conductivity at 40 °C with varying EC content), and at 90 °C it significantly exceeds 1 mS cm⁻¹, at 1.77 mS cm⁻¹. At 40 °C the ionic conductivity is almost twice the value (0.4 mS cm⁻¹) required for electric vehicle applications.⁴⁹ Also the electrochemical stability appears to be very suitable, at about 4.65 V toward oxidation at 40 °C (current threshold: 10 μA cm⁻²) and the characteristic minor decomposition traces of EC and potentially DMSO traces upon reduction.^{37,50} A truly remarkable value, though, was found for the limiting current density, which was determined to be as high as 3.6 mA cm⁻² (Figure 2c). This is much higher than the values obtained earlier for similar SIPEs at 40 °C (i.e., about 1.2 mA cm⁻²,³⁷ and 1.57 mA cm⁻²),⁴¹ indicating that the introduction of the trifluoromethyl groups has a beneficial impact on the electrochemical properties beyond the interfacial stability.⁴⁶ Completing the basic electrochemical characterization, the lithium transference number (t_{Li}^+) was determined following the method reported by Evans, Vincent, and Bruce.⁵¹ The corresponding chronoamperometry (CA) and electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) data are presented in Figure 2d, including also the equivalent model circuit used for analysis of the EIS data. The current initially drops very rapidly after the voltage excitation and then reaches a steady state. The electrolyte resistance remains the same before and after the polarization (i.e., after having reached the steady state), at about 6.7 Ω cm⁻². The interfacial resistance decreases slightly from 165.2 Ω cm⁻² to 161.3 Ω cm⁻², which might be related to a minor reorganization of the ionic groups at the electrode/electrolyte interface, benefiting the charge transfer across the

interface. Using eq S2, the cationic transference number was calculated to be 0.93, which is fairly close to unity and, thus, corroborates the expected single-ion conducting behavior.

The dynamic stability of the lithium/electrolyte interface was further investigated by conducting lithium stripping and plating experiments in symmetric Li||Li cells at 40 °C. The cells were subjected to an alternating and varying current density for 1 h each, ranging from ±5 to ±500 μA cm⁻² (Figure 3a). With increasing current density, the overpotential increases essentially linearly (i.e., doubling the current density results in a 2-fold overpotential increase) but remains constant. However, a slight increase upon cycling is observed for the highest current density (500 μA cm⁻²). Figure 3b displays the magnification of a few selected cycles at each current density, indicated by the dashed frames in Figure 3a. For all current densities up to 300 μA cm⁻², the cycling profiles reveal the constant voltage response expected for single-ion conducting electrolyte systems. At the maximum current density of 500 μA cm⁻², however, the voltage response shows a slight increase upon stripping and plating. This observation indicates that the maximum current density that can be applied to the system is limited to less than 500 μA cm⁻², while higher current densities are limited to discharge/charge pulses. Nonetheless, the subsequent evaluation of the long-term stripping/plating behavior at 50 μA cm⁻² revealed an excellent reversibility and an essentially constant overpotential of about 12 mV for more than 1,600 h (Figure 3c), indicating a very good interfacial stability of the 6FPSF-FPES electrolyte system.

Motivated by these very good electrochemical properties of the 6FPSF-FPES ionomer, we assembled Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells to investigate the performance in combination with state-of-the-

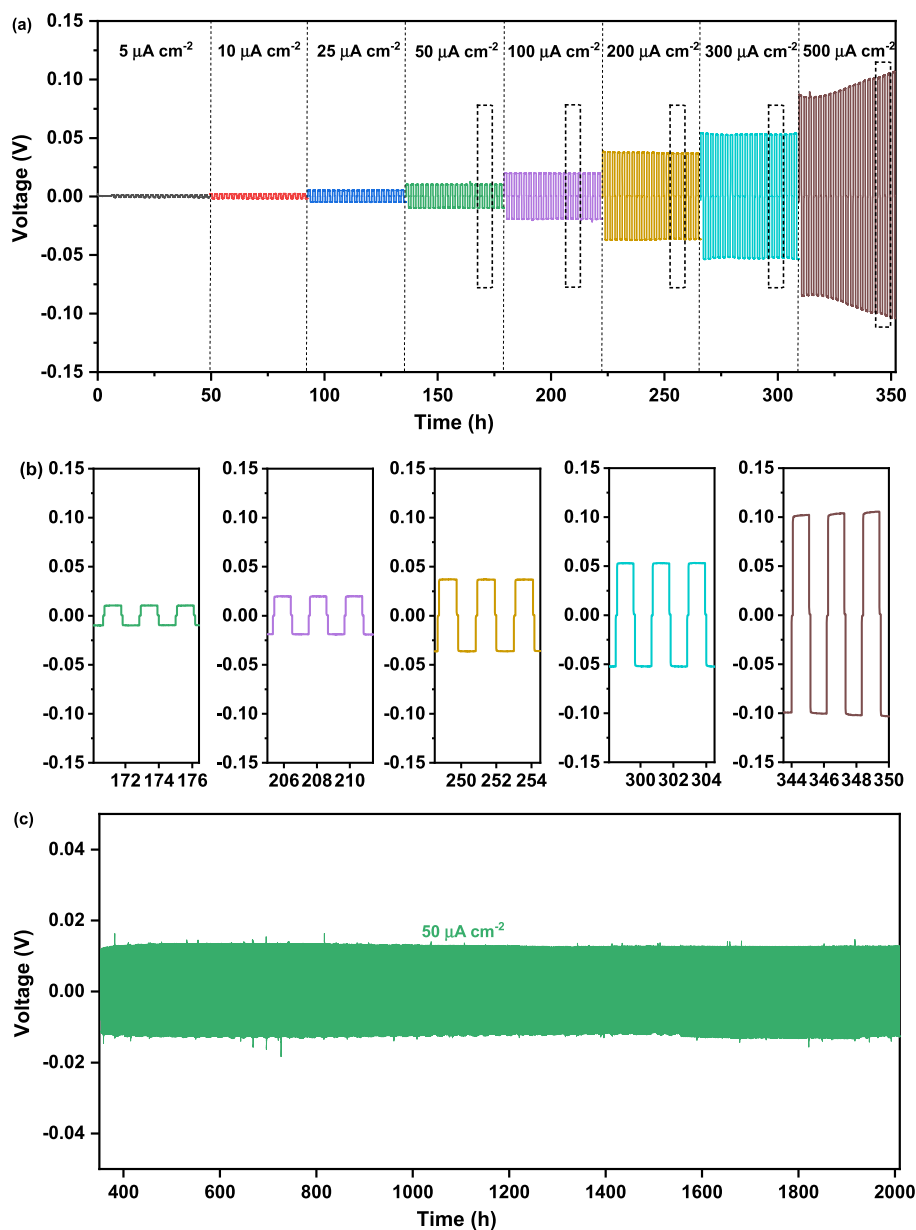


Figure 3. (a) Voltage profiles of LiI6FPSF-FPES-70% ECLi cells at various current densities (40 °C). (b) Magnification of exemplary voltage profiles at different current densities. (c) Galvanostatic lithium stripping and plating at a constant current density of 50 $\mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$, conducted in Li||Li cells (40 °C).

art high-energy cathode materials (Figure 4). Figure 4a,b shows the rate capability and the corresponding discharge/charge profiles when the cut-off voltages were set to 3.0 and 4.2 V. The cells demonstrate a high reversible (discharge) capacity of 180 mAh g^{-1} at 0.1C, which slightly decreases to ca. 160, 150, 140, 125, and 115 mAh g^{-1} at 0.3C, 0.5C, 1C, 2C, and 3C, respectively, owing to the stepwise increase in polarization (Figure 4b). Remarkably, the cell still shows a relatively high reversible capacity of 94 mAh g^{-1} at 5 C. When the discharge/charge rate was lowered to 0.3C again after the cycling at 5C, the capacity increased back to the same value as before, i.e., ca. 160 mAh g^{-1} . This very good rate capability is assigned to the high ionic conductivity, a suitable interfacial contact, and the high limiting current density. Subsequently, the long-term cycling stability of such Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells was evaluated at 0.2C (Figure 4c,d), 1C (Figure 4e,f), and 2C (Figure 4g,h). Generally, the cells show stable cycling at all discharge/charge

rates, though the capacity retention increases from lower to higher rates, i.e., from 83.6% at 0.2C and 95.0% at 1C after more than 160 cycles, to 84.5% after more than 300 cycles at 2C (equivalent to a current density of 0.874 mA cm^{-2}). This trend is also reflected in the average Coulombic efficiency increasing from 99.6% at 0.2C to 99.7% at 2C—presumably owing to the relatively shorter time at elevated potentials when increasing the discharge/charge rate—and the relatively greater increase in polarization (compare, for instance, Figure 4d and Figure 4f; note that a minor fluctuation in Coulombic efficiency and specific capacity in Figure 4c,e,g originates from a power shutdown of the cycler and the climatic chambers). Additionally, the rate capability was tested using the 4.3 V upper cut-off to exploit higher capacities upon elevated charge rates (Figure S7) while using lower anodic cut-offs when cycling at relatively low discharge/charge rates to maximize the lifetime of the battery cell. The initial specific capacity at 0.1C

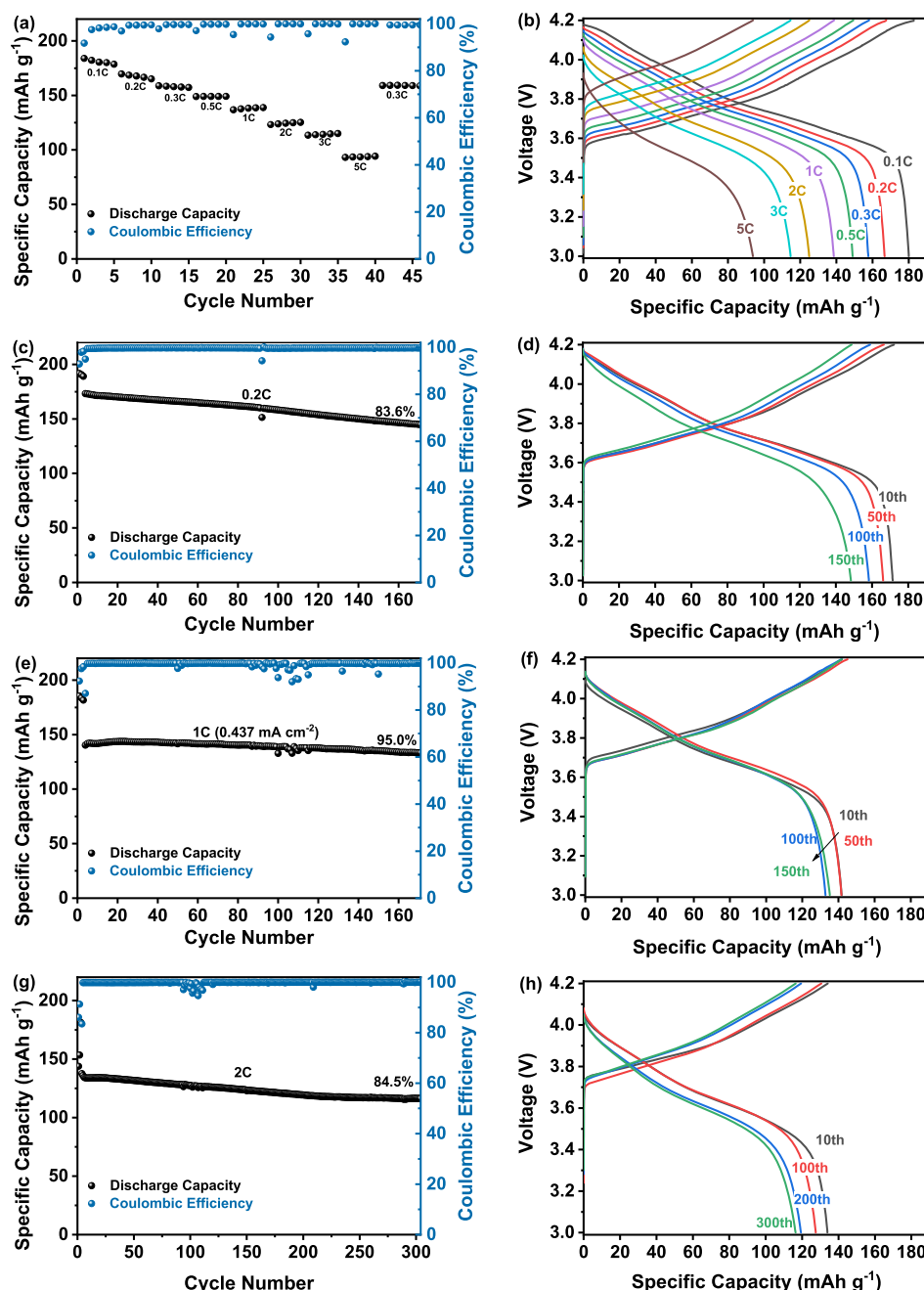


Figure 4. (a) Evaluation of the discharge/charge rate performance of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells comprising 6FPSF-FPES-70% EC as the electrolyte (cut-off voltages: 3.0 and 4.2 V). (b) Exemplary discharge/charge profiles recorded at the different C rates. (c) Constant current cycling of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells at 0.2C and (d) selected discharge/charge profiles of the 10th, 50th, 100th, and 150th cycles. (e) Constant current cycling of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells at 1C and (f) selected discharge/charge profiles of the 10th, 50th, 100th, and 150th cycles. (g) Constant current cycling of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells at 2C and (h) selected discharge/charge profiles of the 10th, 100th, 200th, and 300th cycles. All measurements were conducted at 40 °C.

was higher than 200 mAh g⁻¹ and remained stable across all C rates applied. At 1C and 5C, the specific capacity was 158 and 96 mAh g⁻¹, respectively, i.e., higher than that achieved with the lower anodic cut-off of 4.2 V, while a slight decrease in capacity was observed when the C rate was eventually lowered to 0.3C again. These findings show that higher cut-off voltages can be applied for selected cycles in order to boost the power performance but should remain limited with regard to the long-term cycling stability.

Following these “proof-of-principle experiments” with rather light electrodes (average active material mass loading of ca. 2.3

mg cm⁻²) to exploit the general compatibility of the polymer electrolyte with such Ni-rich cathode materials, electrodes with “industrial-like” mass loadings (10.6 mg cm⁻²) were explored. The cycling behavior of these electrodes, which comprise 5 wt % of the 6FPSF-FPES ionomer to ensure sufficient ionic conductivity, in Li||6FPSF-FPES||NCM₈₁₁ cells is presented in Figure 5. The cells show a high specific capacity of 161 mAh g⁻¹, with a capacity retention of 86.1% after 100 cycles and a Coulombic efficiency of 99.8% (Figure 5a). The corresponding discharge/charge profiles (Figure 5b) reveal some increase in polarization upon cycling, which might be in part related to the

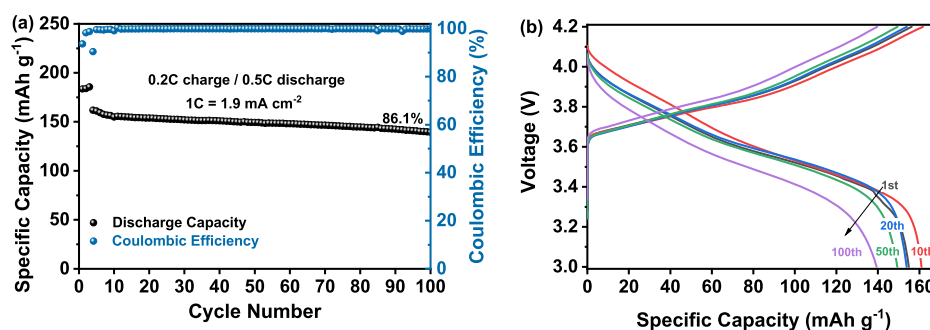


Figure 5. Galvanostatic cycling of Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells comprising NCM₈₁₁ cathodes with a very high active material mass loading of $10.6 \pm 0.1 \text{ mg cm}^{-2}$ at 40°C (cut-off voltages: 3.0 and 4.2 V). (a) Plot of the specific capacity as a function of cycle number (first three cycles: 0.05C; subsequently the cell was charged at 0.2C and discharged at 0.5C). (b) Selected discharge/charge profiles of the 1st, 10th, 20th, 50th, and 100th cycles.

need for a further enhanced electrode design and polymer electrolyte incorporation. Nonetheless, the results also show that industrially relevant electrode mass loadings are generally feasible. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first report on a polymer electrolyte with such high mass loading Ni-rich NCM electrodes (see also Table S3 for a comparison with previous studies on related systems).

In summary, a novel multi-block copolymer SIPE has been successfully synthesized. This SIPE is characterized by a high ionic conductivity of 0.69 mS cm^{-1} at 40°C , a suitable electrochemical stability toward oxidation and metallic lithium, as proven by more than 1,600 h of lithium stripping and plating without a significant increase in overpotential, and a very high limiting current density when 70 wt% of EC was incorporated. Li||NCM₈₁₁ cells comprising this SIPE show stable cycling at varying discharge/charge rates with, for instance, 84.5% capacity retention after more than 300 cycles at 2C. Remarkably, electrodes with an active material mass loading of 10.6 mg cm^{-2} show very good cycling performance for 100 cycles, achieving great average Coulombic efficiency (99.8%) and capacity retention of 86.1%. All in all, these results support a great step forward toward the potential commercialization of SIPEs in lithium batteries.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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