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# The molecular switching mechanism at the conserved E(D)RY motif in class-A GPCRs

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## Abstract

The disruption of ionic and H-bond interactions between the cytosolic ends of transmembrane helices TM3 and TM6 of class-A (rhodopsin-like) G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) is a hallmark for their activation by chemical or physical stimuli. In the photoreceptor rhodopsin, this is accompanied by proton uptake at Glu<sup>134</sup> in the class-conserved E(D)RY motif. Studies on TM3 model peptides proposed a crucial role of the lipid bilayer in linking protonation to stabilization of an active state-like conformation. However, the molecular details of this linkage could not be resolved and have been addressed here by molecular dynamics (MD) simulations on TM3 model peptides in a DOPC bilayer.

We show that protonation of the conserved glutamic acid alters its side chain rotamer preferences and stabilizes the C-terminal helical structure. Both factors contribute to the rise of the side chain pK<sub>a</sub> (> 6) and to reduced polarity around the TM3 C-terminus as confirmed by fluorescence spectroscopy. Helix stabilization requires the protonated carboxyl group; unexpectedly, this stabilization could not be evoked with an amide in MD simulations. Additionally, time-resolved FTIR spectroscopy of TM3 model peptides revealed a different kinetics for lipid ester carbonyl hydration, suggesting that the carboxyl is linked to more extended H-bond clusters than an amide. Remarkably, this was seen as well in DOPC-reconstituted Glu<sup>134</sup>- and Gln<sup>134</sup>-containing opsin mutants and demonstrates that

25 the E(D)RY motif is a hydrated microdomain. The function of the E(D)RY motif as a proton switch is suggested  
26 to be based on the reorganization of the H-bond network at the membrane interface.

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28

## 29 Introduction

30 G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) are a superfamily of membrane proteins that undergo conformational changes  
31 in response to extracellular chemical or physical stimuli. The ensuing conformational changes of their seven trans-  
32 membrane TM helical structure lead to an activated receptor state which catalyzes GDP / GTP exchange in  
33 cytosolic G proteins (guanosine nucleotide-binding proteins). More than 600 GPCRs in humans belong to the  
34 class-A (1) which is characterized by structural homology with the visual photoreceptor rhodopsin. In contrast  
35 to ligand-activated GPCRs, rhodopsin is activated by 11-cis to all-trans photoisomerization of the retinal, which  
36 is covalently bound via a protonated Schiff base to the side chain nitrogen of Lys<sup>296</sup> of the apoprotein opsin (see  
37 Fig. 1). Functional studies of bovine rhodopsin have contributed to the identification of critical molecular activation  
38 steps that are thought to be shared by class-A GPCRs as has been reviewed in detail (2, 3). It has been shown for  
39 the  $\beta_2$ -adrenergic receptor that the breakage of ionic and H-bond interactions which link the cytosolic ends of TM3  
40 and TM6 in the inactive receptor state is crucial for GPCR activation (4–6). Studies on bovine rhodopsin revealed  
41 that the corresponding distance increase between TM3 and TM6 (7) is followed by a proton uptake reaction in the  
42 side chain of Glu<sup>134</sup> within the class-conserved E(D)RY motif at the C-terminal end of TM3 (8). This cytosolic  
43 'proton switch' (9, 10) involves the proton exchange with the environment and is thus pH-dependent. It is evoked  
44 by preceding light-induced structural changes (11) and internal proton transfer reactions (12) among which the  
45 pH-insensitive internal 'proton switch I', i.e., the transfer of the Schiff base proton to its counterion Glu<sup>113</sup> (13),  
46 is the key step that leads to the active metarhodopsin II (MIIa) conformation (14). The following movement of  
47 TM6 and TM5 (helices H6 and H5, MIIb state, see Fig. 1 A.1 and B) precedes the protonation at Glu<sup>134</sup> in the  
48 conserved D(E)RY motif at the C-terminal end of TM3 (H3), leading to the MIIbH<sup>+</sup> intermediate (7, 10, 15, 16)  
49 (Fig. 1 A.2). The latter step occurs with an unusually high pK<sub>a</sub> > 6 (17) indicative of the energetic stabilization of  
50 the protonated state. Receptor activation thus follows a sequence of thermally activated structural transitions in  
51 multiple microdomains which in rhodopsin are spatially and temporally (from ps to ms) separated. The description  
52 of the activation process by a hierarchy of structural 'on-off' transitions has originally been based on the spectro-  
53 scopic identification of inactive rhodopsin states with partial active-like structural features (18) which may cause  
54 enhanced thermal receptor activation related to disease (19). Neutralization of the Glu134 side chain has been

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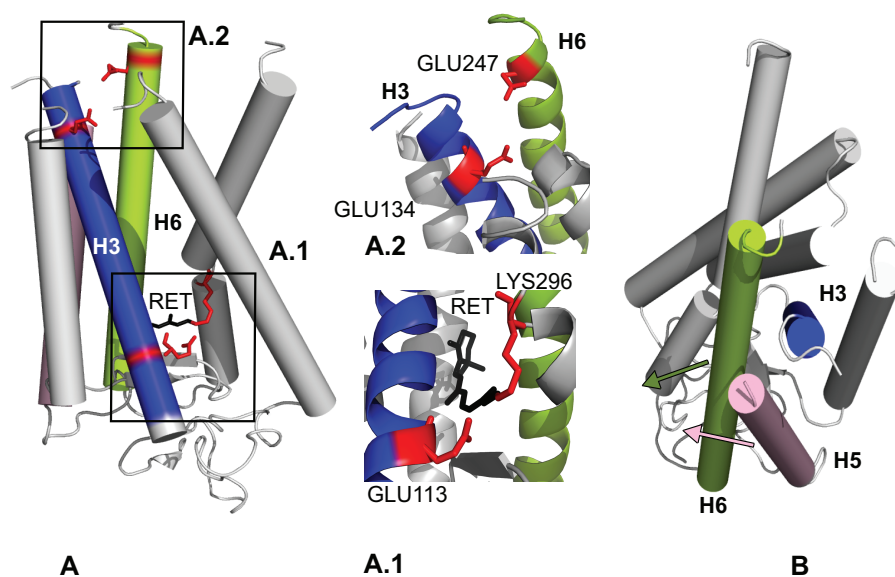


Figure 1: (A) Two proton switches may explain the mechanism of activation of rhodopsin: (A.1) The retinal isomerization produces a transfer of the Schiff base proton to Glu<sup>113</sup>. (A.2) Glu<sup>134</sup> positioned in the conserved E(D)RY motif at the C-terminal of TM3 (helix H3) takes up a proton, leading to the MIIbH<sup>+</sup> intermediate. (B) The hallmark of the transition to active rhodopsin is the movement of helices 6 and 5 (H6, H5) away from H3. See Hofmann *et al.* (2) for details.

55 identified as one of the crucial activity-promoting factors (20, 21). Although the concept of concerted microdomain  
 56 switches explains receptor activation (22), the underlying structures are not individually folding units in the strict  
 57 sense of a protein domain. This raises the question whether short specific sequence motifs of an individually folding  
 58 TM domain can exhibit local switching processes at all. In the case of the 'proton switch II' at Glu<sup>134</sup>, it has  
 59 been argued that the C-terminal end of the isolated TM3 provides an 'autonomous' structural switch that couples  
 60 protonation to secondary structure formation by side chain partitioning across the lipid water phase boundary (23).  
 61 Lipid exposure has been suggested to be crucial for this coupling as the protonated side chain would be stabilized by  
 62 the low dielectric of a bilayer. Whereas the predicted high pK<sub>a</sub> of the side chain could be confirmed experimentally,  
 63 neither the transmembrane topology of the TM3 domain nor the location of secondary structure formation could  
 64 be determined unequivocally. Furthermore, structural details of the interaction of the Glu<sup>134</sup> side chain with the  
 65 sub-headgroup region are not known.

66 In order to reveal these molecular details, we have performed atomistic molecular dynamics simulations, fluores-  
 67 cence and time-resolved infrared-spectroscopic experiments on lipid-inserted TM3 model peptides. Our data provide  
 68 a detailed description of proton-induced changes in the secondary structure and topology of TM3. We demonstrate  
 69 that the pK<sub>a</sub> of the Glu<sup>134</sup> carboxyl is not only tuned by the local dielectric environment at the phase boundary  
 70 but also by the side chain rotamer state. Finally, the role of the conserved carboxyl group for lipid sub-headgroup



Table 1: **Sequences of TM3 model peptides used in this study.** Bold: position 27 carrying the glutamic acid of the conserved E(D)RY motif of class-A GPCRs. Underlined: additional amino acid replacements which increase helix stability or neutralize the side chain at position 27.

Peptides Names	Sequence
P1	TGCNLEGFFATLGGEIALW <u>SLVVLAI</u> <b>ERYV</b> V
P2	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALW</u> SLVVLAI <b>ERYV</b> V
P3	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALW</u> SLVVLAI <b>QRYV</b> V
P4	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALF</u> SLVVLAI <b>ERYV</b> W
P5	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALF</u> SLVVLAI <b>QRYV</b> W
P6	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALF</u> SLV <u>VWAI</u> <b>ERYV</b> V
P7	TGCNLAGFFATLGG <u>AIALF</u> SLV <u>VWAI</u> <b>QRYV</b> V
ICL2	AIERYVWVCKPMSNFRFG

71 hydration is addressed by infrared spectroscopy using both model peptides and Glu<sup>134</sup>- and Gln<sup>134</sup>-containing opsin  
72 mutants.

### 73 Methods

74 **Peptide sequences used in MD calculations.** The initial structure of the wild type peptide P1 was derived from  
75 the transmembrane helix-3 (TM3) of rhodopsin (pdb entry 1F88, residues 108 – 138) and comprised the amino acids:  
76 TGCNLEGFFATLGGEIALWSLVVLAI**ERYV**V. The numbering of all residues is based on the peptide sequence  
77 running from T1 to V31. The amino acid Glu<sup>134</sup> of the native rhodopsin sequence in the conserved E(D)RY motif  
78 of class-1 GPCRs corresponds to residue 27 in the peptide models and is designated Glu<sup>27</sup>. In order to achieve  
79 comparability with previous spectroscopic studies, glutamic acids that do not belong to the conserved E(D)RY  
80 motif were replaced by alanine in all TM3 peptides investigated here (Table I). In addition to fixing the ionized  
81 or protonated state of Glu<sup>27</sup> in the calculations (systems P1 and P2), peptides with the Glu<sup>27</sup>Q replacement were  
82 studied (system P3). However, spectroscopic studies of these peptides showed that it adopted a mixture of non-  
83 helical and helical states which could be avoided by the additional Trp<sup>19</sup>Phe / Val<sup>31</sup>Trp double replacement. In  
84 order to validate corresponding experimental results, MD simulations were performed for peptides carrying this  
85 additional double replacement and a Glu or Gln residue at position 27, respectively (systems P4 and P5). For  
86 comparison, MD simulations were also performed with the ICL2 peptide (AIERYVWVCKPMSNFRFG) derived  
87 from the second intracellular loop which extends from helix 3. It still carries the conserved E(D)RY motif but lacks  
88 the preceding transmembrane segment and was not inserted into a lipidic phase.

89

90

91 **Details of MD simulations.** Each studied peptide was inserted using the g\_membed tool (24) into a sys-  
92 tem with 128 lipids of 1,2-dioleoyl-sn-glycero-3-phosphocholine (DOPC), and hydrated with 40 water molecules

93 (TIP3p (25)) per lipid. Peptides with aspartic acid or glutamic acid in the D(E)RY motif, were generated in both  
94 protonated and unprotonated states. The Gromacs 4.5.5 package (26) was used and the leap-frog algorithm applied  
95 as integrator with a time step of 2 fs. An isothermal-isobaric scheme (NPT) was chosen with the temperature cou-  
96 pled to a heat bath at 303 K, using the Nose-Hoover thermostat with a time coupling constant of 0.5 ps (27, 28).  
97 The peptide, the lipid bilayer, and the solvent were coupled separately to the thermostat. The Parrinello-Rahman  
98 barostat was used to keep the pressure constant at 1.013 bar, with a time coupling constant of 10.0 ps and an  
99 isothermal compressibility of  $4 \times 10^5 \text{ bar}^{-1}$  (29). The barostat was used with a semi-isotropic scheme, where the  
100 pressure in the x-y plane (bilayer plane) and z direction (bilayer normal) were coupled separately. The covalent  
101 bonds were constrained with the LINCS (30) and SETTLE (31) algorithms. The long-range electrostatic interac-  
102 tions were treated using the particle mesh Ewald method, with a cut-off in real space of 1.0 nm, and a Fourier  
103 spacing of 0.12. The cut-off for van der Waals interactions was chosen to 1.5 nm, using a switch function starting  
104 from 1.4 nm. All the systems were simulated using periodic boundary conditions. SLIPIDS (32) and AMBER99 (33)  
105 were used as force fields for lipids and peptides, respectively. The systems were minimized using the steepest descent  
106 algorithm ( $< 50,000$  steps) and equilibrated for 50 ns with position restraints on the heavy atoms of the peptide.  
107 The production simulations were run for 200 ns each.

108

109 **Infrared spectroscopy of lipid-reconstituted model peptides and opsin mutants.** Peptides P6 and P7  
110 were synthesized with C- and N-terminus amidated and acetylated, respectively, HPLC-purified and trifluoroacetate  
111 was removed (ThermoFisher, Ulm, Germany). The peptides were reconstituted into vesicles of 1,2-Dioleoyl-sn-  
112 Glycerol-3-Phosphocholine (DOPC; Avanti Polar Lipids, Inc. Alabaster, USA) by dissolving 10 mg DOPC and  
113 1.5 mg of the peptides in 100-200  $\mu\text{L}$  ethanol followed by solvent evaporation, resolution in 40  $\mu\text{L}$  ethanol and  
114 finally rapid dilution in 1960  $\mu\text{L}$   $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  (34). Vesicles were formed by at least 10 freeze-thaw cycles of the sus-  
115 pension (35). Rhodopsin mutants carrying the stabilizing Asn<sup>2</sup>Cys/Asp<sup>282</sup>Cys amino acid replacements (36) were  
116 expressed in HEK-239S cells and detergent-solubilized as described (37), except for using 1% octylglucoside (OG)  
117 instead of dodecylmaltoside. These mutants were subsequently purified by using rho-1D4 immunoaffinity chro-  
118 matography (37). The protein concentration was determined according to Bradford. The solubilized mutant opsins  
119 Asn<sup>2</sup>Cys/Asp<sup>282</sup>Cys and Asn<sup>2</sup>Cys/Asp<sup>282</sup>Cys/Glu<sup>134</sup>Gln were mixed with DOPC in 1% OG in a 1:100 protein to  
120 lipid ratio in a total volume of 200-250  $\mu\text{L}$ . They were simultaneously dialyzed in mini dialysis cups in the identical  
121 buffer (1 L of 5 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.4) with one complete buffer exchange overnight.

122 The lipid-reconstituted peptide and purified opsin samples were dried on an attenuated total reflectance (ATR)  
123 crystal under a gentle stream of nitrogen and hydrated overnight to 85% and 75% relative humidity (r.h.) using  
124 a reservoir of a saturated KCl or NaCl solution, respectively (38), separated from the DOPC film by a dialysis  
125 membrane and a 1 mm gap of air above the sample. The acquisition of time-resolved Fourier transform infrared

(FTIR) difference spectra induced by hydration has been described in detail (39, 40). Briefly, the r.h. above the sample is increased within 2-4 seconds by a heating current in the salt solution. IR absorption difference spectra are generated from the transmission at defined time intervals after the hydration pulse and the sample transmission at the initial equilibrium hydration. Positive absorption changes are caused by the more hydrated state, negative bands by the initially less hydrated sample. Relaxation of the different samples to the equilibrium hydration took 60 to 180 seconds. An additional waiting time of 5 min was allowed before repeating the experiment in an automated fashion for signal averaging.

## Results

**Coupling of E<sup>27</sup> protonation to transmembrane helicity.** Previous infrared spectroscopic data on detergent-solubilized TM3 model peptides of bovine rhodopsin supported a protonation-dependent secondary structural transition near the E(D)RY motif in the visual photoreceptor and possibly other GPCRs. However, the extent of helix formation along the sequence and its location relative to the membrane water interface could not be determined. In order to test the proposed pH-regulation of TM3 conformation on a more detailed molecular level, we studied the influence of protonation on the secondary structure of TM3 of rhodopsin using atomistic molecular dynamics (MD) simulations of peptides in a phospholipid bilayer. For comparison with earlier experimental peptide studies using FTIR, CD, and fluorescence spectroscopy (23), a family of related sequences was investigated as well. The peptide P2 (compare Table 1) served as a single transmembrane helical model for the native TM3 sequence and the single carboxyl group in the side chain of E<sup>27</sup> was chosen to be either protonated or unprotonated in the calculations. Figure 2 A shows the probability for observing the residues of peptide P2 in  $\alpha$ -helical conformation. The propensity for  $\alpha$ -helix formation was at least 10% higher for the C-terminal end of P2 (residues 20–26) in its protonated form as compared to the unprotonated P2 peptide.

For comparison, a simulation was performed for a peptide with the additional E<sup>27</sup>Q replacement (P3). Such a replacement is generally considered a mimic of the protonated form of a glutamate side chain. However, the helicity in P3 barely exceeded that of P2 in its ionized form. This result suggests that the specific H-bonding properties of a carboxyl group rather than merely its charge state are critically involved in (protonation-dependent) secondary structure formation. The data agree with previous infrared absorption measurements of the protonation-induced C-terminal helix-formation: P2 was incorporated in a detergent micelle, whereas P3 had not been investigated spectroscopically because it formed a large fraction of non-helical structure in detergent. This problem was overcome by the additional Trp<sup>126</sup>Phe/Val<sup>138</sup>Trp replacement (residues 24 and 31 in peptides P4, P5) which stabilized the  $\alpha$ -helical structure in the experiments (23). Simulations of the corresponding P4 and P5 peptides showed a slightly enhanced  $\alpha$ -helical content of the P4 peptide with respect to the wild type sequence (Fig. 2B). Also for the P4 peptide, a protonation-induced increase of helicity at the C-terminal part was observed. Again, the replacement of

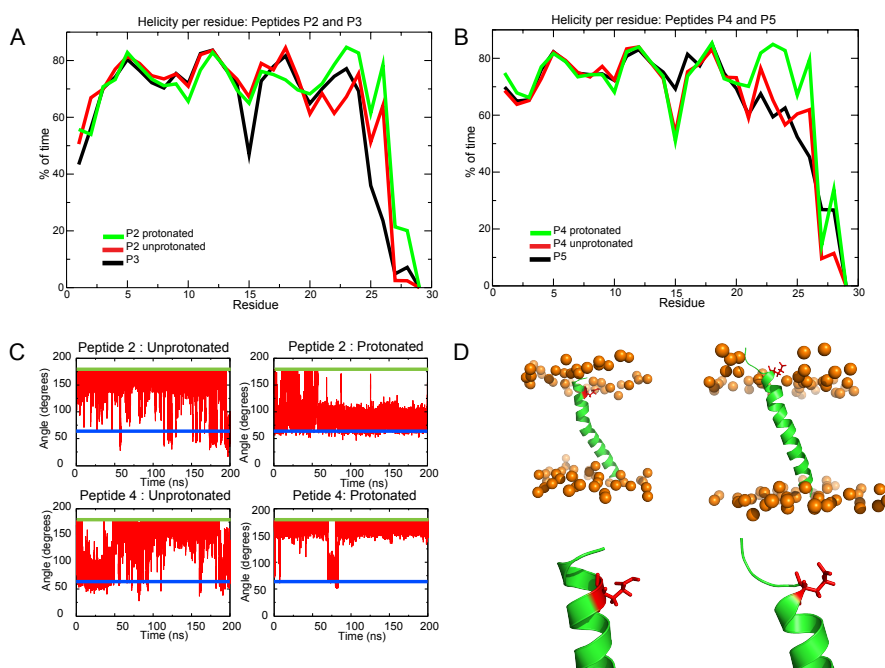


Figure 2: Percentage of helicity per amino acid averaged over 200 ns of simulation. Peptides P2 (A) and P4 (B) were studied in their protonated and unprotonated states and compared with the respective sequences carrying the additional E27Q replacement (P3 and P5, respectively). (C) Dihedral angle  $\chi_2$  of glutamic acid as a function of simulation investigated for different peptides. The dihedral angle  $\chi_2$  of glutamic acid is represented by red, the blue and green lines mark the cut-off value for gauche and trans conformations, respectively. (D) Upper panel: transmembrane topology of P4 with E<sup>27</sup> in the protonated (*left*) and ionized (*right*) state. Lower panel: close up view of the favored protonation-dependent rotamer states of E<sup>27</sup>.

158 the titratable amino acid E<sup>27</sup> by the structurally homologous glutamine residue (P5) did not yield results equivalent  
 159 to the peptide with protonated E<sup>27</sup> side chain.

160 The data agree with the proposed coupling of protonation and conformation at the C-terminus of TM3, but  
 161 allow to pinpoint the helix stabilization to about five amino acids within the lipidic phase preceding the actual  
 162 titration site. Furthermore, the data demonstrate that the protonated carboxyl group and the amide group differ  
 163 significantly in their influence on the peptide structure, despite their common neutral state.

164

165 **Dynamics of E<sup>27</sup> side chain conformation.** A key assumption of the previously proposed mechanism that  
 166 couples side chain protonation to conformation is the fluctuation of the Glu<sup>134</sup> side chain between an 'exposed' and  
 167 a 'buried' geometry at the membrane interface once the ionic lock is disrupted upon photoactivation of rhodopsin.  
 168 Therefore, the local peptide structure was further assessed by monitoring fluctuations of the dihedral angle of E<sup>27</sup>  
 169 as a function of protonation. Both, the native P2 sequence and the P4 sequence with the C-terminal valine replaced  
 170 by tryptophan exhibited fluctuations between the gauche and trans conformation of their ionized E<sup>27</sup> side chain  
 171 (Fig. 2C). These fluctuations were strongly reduced upon protonation, leading to the prevalence of the gauche

rotamer for P2, whereas the trans rotamer was stabilized in P4. Thus, although the coupling of protonation to secondary structure formation was identified as a robust feature of the ERY motif (see above), the side chain conformation appears to be further regulated by the sequence context or the peptide insertion depth. Irrespective of this context, however, protonation of both P2 and P4 peptides reduced structural fluctuations. Figure 2 D visualizes the protonation-dependent rotamer preference in the transmembrane topology of P4, showing the position of the gauche rotamer of the ionized carboxyl at the level of the lipid phosphates (*right*), whereas in the protonated state (*left*), the preferred trans isomer locates the carboxyl to the sub-headgroup region.

**Protonation-dependent transmembrane positioning of the helical backbone.** In addition to helicity and local side chain rotamer preferences, also the insertion depths of the peptides are influenced by the protonation state. The analysis of the membrane insertion depth as a function of sequence position shows that the whole P2 peptide is shifted by  $\approx 5 \text{ \AA}$  towards the N-terminal membrane leaflet upon protonation of Glu<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 3). For peptide P4 with Trp<sup>19</sup>Phe and Val<sup>31</sup>Trp replacements this shift is much less pronounced and only seen for positions close to Glu<sup>27</sup>. I.e. the interfacial tryptophan-31 firmly anchors the C-terminus of the peptide to the membrane interfacial region. Thus the protonation state of the E(D)RY motif not only controls the local peptide helicity but as well the (local) membrane insertion depth and thus hydrophobicity.

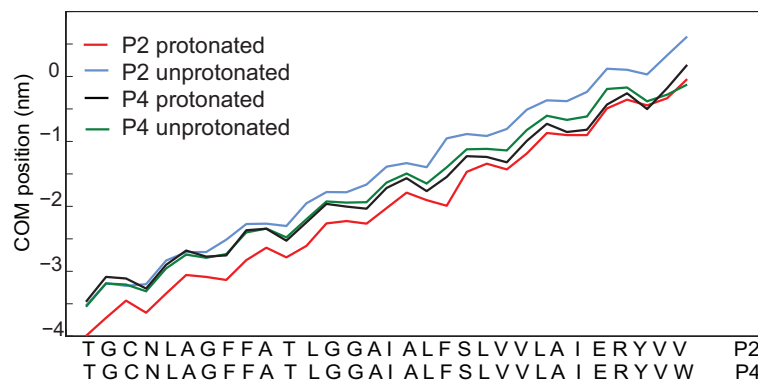


Figure 3: Center of mass (COM) location of amino acids across the lipid bilayer for peptides P2 and P4 for both protonated and unprotonated forms of Glu<sup>27</sup>. The values were averaged over the final 50 ns of simulation time, the COM of the lipid head groups of the upper monolayer was set to zero.

**Coupling of E<sup>27</sup> side chain pK<sub>a</sub> to dielectric environment.** The results of a protonation-induced increased membrane insertion depth and increased helicity suggests a dielectric mechanism in the stabilization of the peptide structure and location: The increased hydrophobic immersion of Glu<sup>134</sup> upon protonation and the coupled lowering of the dielectric constant of its environment may contribute to the high pK<sub>a</sub> > 6 of Glu<sup>134</sup> in the proton-dependent equilibrium between MIIa and MIIbH<sup>+</sup> states of light-activated rhodopsin (17) and of TM3 model peptides (23).

194 This hypothesis of an interplay between peptide protonation and localization was addressed by *in silico* analysis of  
195 the Glu<sup>27</sup> pK<sub>a</sub> dependency on the dielectric environment.

196 The pK<sub>a</sub> was computed in dependence of two factors: (a) the dielectric constant was varied between 2 and 80,  
197 corresponding to the transition between the hydrophobic membrane core and the aqueous phase; (b) the effect of  
198 the secondary structure was addressed by computing the pK<sub>a</sub> of the Glu<sup>27</sup> side chain in peptides P2, P4, and for  
199 comparison in ICL2. Peptides P2 and P4 have a defined helical structure in a lipid environment. In contrast, the  
200 peptide ICL2 is water soluble and corresponds to the N-terminal part of the second intracellular loop of rhodopsin.  
201 The pK<sub>a</sub> of Glu<sup>27</sup> in peptides P2 and P4 was observed to strongly depend on both the dielectric environment and  
202 the secondary structure: it ranged from 5.2 ( $\epsilon = 80$ ) to more than 10 at  $\epsilon < 10$  (Figure 4 A). In contrast, the pK<sub>a</sub>  
203 of the same side chain in the ICL2 peptide in coiled conformation showed a similar dependency on the dielectric  
204 constant, however ranged approximately one unit below the pK<sub>a</sub> values of Glu<sup>27</sup> in P2 and P4.

205 Thus the increased membrane insertion of the protonated Glu<sup>27</sup> and the corresponding decrease in dielectric  
206 constant can partly explain the elevated pK<sub>a</sub>. Additionally, the rotamer states may contribute to pK<sub>a</sub> regulation as  
207 well: In P2 and P4, the protonated form of Glu<sup>27</sup> adopts preferentially the gauche and trans rotamer, respectively,  
208 and this correlates with an almost constant pK<sub>a</sub> difference between the carboxyl in the two peptides over the tested  
209 range of dielectric constants. The effect of the rotamer on side chain pK<sub>a</sub> is further discussed below.

210

211 **E<sup>27</sup> protonation exerts long-range dielectric effects within the bilayer.** The MD analysis demon-  
212 strated the interdependence of transmembrane topology, local hydrophobicity, side chain protonation and secondary  
213 structure. The predicted change in the dielectric environment of the C-terminal end of TM3 as a consequence of  
214 protonation-induced repositioning relative to the bilayer was experimentally validated using a peptide with the  
215 replacement Leu<sup>24</sup>Trp (peptide P6). This residue provides a fluorescence monitor by a blue-shift of its emission  
216 upon lowering of the local dielectric constant in the majority of proteins (41).

217 Figure 4 B shows that the tryptophan emission is affected by pH, despite the fact that Trp<sup>24</sup> is located by a  
218 helical turn deeper in the membrane than Glu<sup>27</sup>. In agreement with the predicted model, the emission of Trp<sup>24</sup>  
219 became blue-shifted upon protonation of Glu<sup>27</sup>, demonstrating an increased insertion depth into the lipid bilayer.  
220 Whereas little pH sensitivity was observed between pH 3 and 6, the blue shift was mainly induced between pH 6  
221 and 7. This confirms the unusually high pK<sub>a</sub> of the Glu<sup>27</sup> side chain carboxyl derived from the theoretical pK<sub>a</sub>  
222 analysis and also seen for similar TM3 model peptides (23). The pH effect was abolished when Glu<sup>27</sup> was replaced  
223 by Gln (P7 peptide), which further proves the Glu<sup>27</sup>-mediated molecular mechanism. Emission from Trp<sup>24</sup> of the  
224 P7 peptide was not only pH-insensitive but also observed at shorter wavelength than for P6 (Fig. 4 B, inset). This  
225 result indicates a conformational stabilization of the C-terminal part by the neutral Gln side chain as opposed to  
226 a side chain that is in equilibrium with an ionized form.

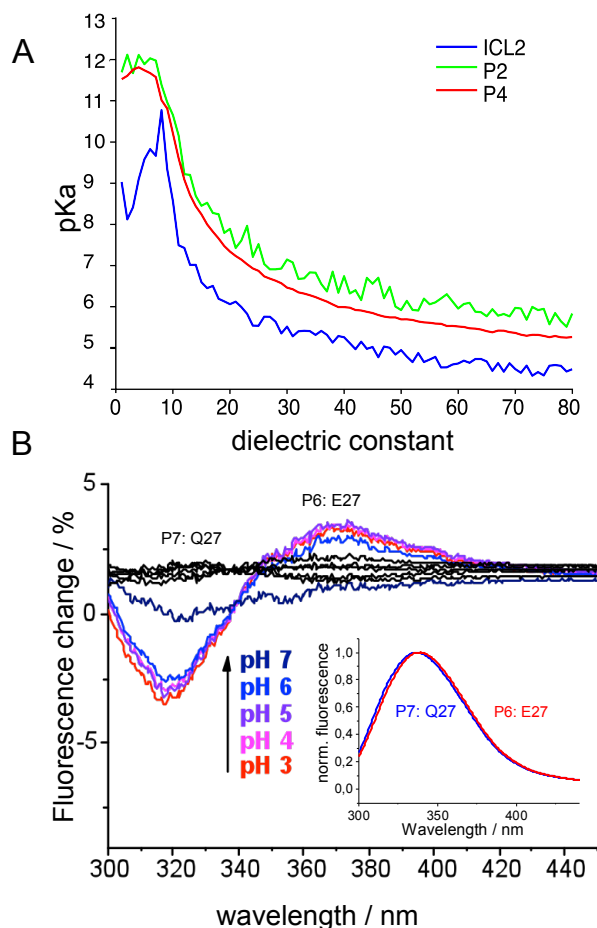


Figure 4: Theoretical and experimental  $pK_a$  estimates for Glu<sup>27</sup>. A)  $pK_a$  calculations for Glu<sup>27</sup> in P2, P4, and ILC2 as a function of the dielectric constant in a homogenous dielectric medium. B) Tryptophan fluorescence of lipid-reconstituted peptides. The displayed pH-dependent spectral shifts were obtained by subtracting the emission spectra taken at the indicated pH values from an emission spectrum recorded at pH 8.8. Thereby, the emission in the ionized state of Glu<sup>27</sup> in P6 is positive, that of the protonated state is negative (color-coded). The pH sensitivity is abolished in P7 (black). Inset: emission spectra of P6 (red) and P7 (blue) at pH 8.8.

227 In summary, the MD calculations and tryptophan fluorescence measurements show that the protonation of the  
 228 Glu<sup>27</sup> side chain provides a structural switch: The protonation of this site results in a shift of the peptide parallel to  
 229 the membrane normal that is more pronounced for the non-Trp anchored peptide P2. This protonation-dependent  
 230 switch observed in the peptide is expected to contribute to the conformation and energetics of the full length  
 231 receptor. Remarkably, this switch is tailored to the physical constraints of the lipid water phase boundary, such  
 232 that protonation leads to repositioning of TM3, a reduced flexibility of both the peptide backbone and the side  
 233 chain of Glu<sup>27</sup>, and to altered side chain rotamer preferences.

234

235 **Side chain-dependent dynamics of the sub-headgroup H-bond network.** The MD calculations have  
 236 revealed an unexpected difference between the neutral protonated carboxyl group and the structurally similar amide

237 group of Gln at position 27 in regulating local secondary structure. Only the protonated carboxyl group stabilized  
238 the C-terminal  $\alpha$ -helical structure in P2 and P4, whereas Gln<sup>27</sup> showed this effect in neither peptide. On the other  
239 hand, Gln<sup>27</sup> induced a position shift at Trp<sup>24</sup>, as did protonation of Glu<sup>27</sup>.

240 The only partial mimicking of the protonated state of Glu<sup>27</sup> by Gln<sup>27</sup> indicates that in addition to charge, the  
241 specific H-bonding geometries of the carboxyl function are required for peptide structure formation. Secondary  
242 structure depends on intramolecular backbone H-bonds which compete with intermolecular water H-bonds. There-  
243 fore, the interaction of the E(D)RY motif with water in the lipid ester carbonyl region could be crucial for the  
244 unique structure induction by a protonated carboxyl rather than an amide. This has motivated us to study the  
245 hydration of the DOPC carbonyl region in the presence of P6 and P7.

246 The infrared absorption of the ester carbonyl stretching mode and the OH-stretching vibration in corresponding  
247 lipid films was observed by time-resolved Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy as a function of hydration.  
248 The technique employs a short hydration pulse which increases the relative humidity of air above the lipid film (from  
249 85% RH to 90-95%) within seconds. The experimental setup has been described in detail for the hydration of DNA  
250 and lipids (39, 40) and allows to follow the relaxation of the sample to its initial r.h. with seconds time-resolution.

251 Figure 5 A exemplifies this for a pure DOPC film for which the time-dependent water content was monitored  
252 by the absorption change of the OH stretching mode at 3370  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . It is plotted together with the amplitudes of  
253 the absorption change of the lipid C=O stretching mode at 1739/1712  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ . The curves are averages of 10 such  
254 experiments and their perfect superposition demonstrates that the water content and the H-bond strength at the  
255 ester carbonyls equilibrated during the entire time-course. This synchronicity was preserved in the presence of P6  
256 (Fig. 5 B), where an additional absorption change at 1663/1650  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  revealed changes in peptide bond geometry  
257 / H-bonding. Figure 6 A shows the corresponding IR raw data for P7 and compares the C=O hydration response  
258 for P6 and P7. Whereas the H-bond-dependent change of the C=O stretching absorption scaled again strictly with  
259 hydration for both peptides, the relaxation time for P7 carrying the neutral Gln side chain was faster than for P6.  
260 The data show that the presence of the carboxyl function slows down the re-equilibration of lipid-bound water with  
261 the gas phase above the lipid film. This supports the critical role of carboxyl-specific H-bonds which need to be  
262 broken upon removal of the excess water taken up during transient hydration.

263 The data raise the question whether the different sub-headgroup hydration properties seen with a carboxyl or  
264 amide group at the membrane water interface of DOPC also persist in full length opsins. Opsin mutants carrying  
265 the stabilizing Asn<sup>2</sup>Cys/Asp<sup>282</sup>Cys double replacement were expressed, reconstituted in DOPC (Methods) and  
266 hydrated lipid films adsorbed on an ATR crystal in the same manner used for peptide-containing films. Figure 6 B  
267 shows the time-resolved IR raw data for stabilized opsin and a mutant that contains the additional Glu<sup>134</sup>Gln  
268 mutation. Both opsins reproduced the strong synchronicity between water content and ester carbonyl H-bonding,  
269 evident from the traces derived from the absorption changes at 3400  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  and the 1740/1709  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  difference band.



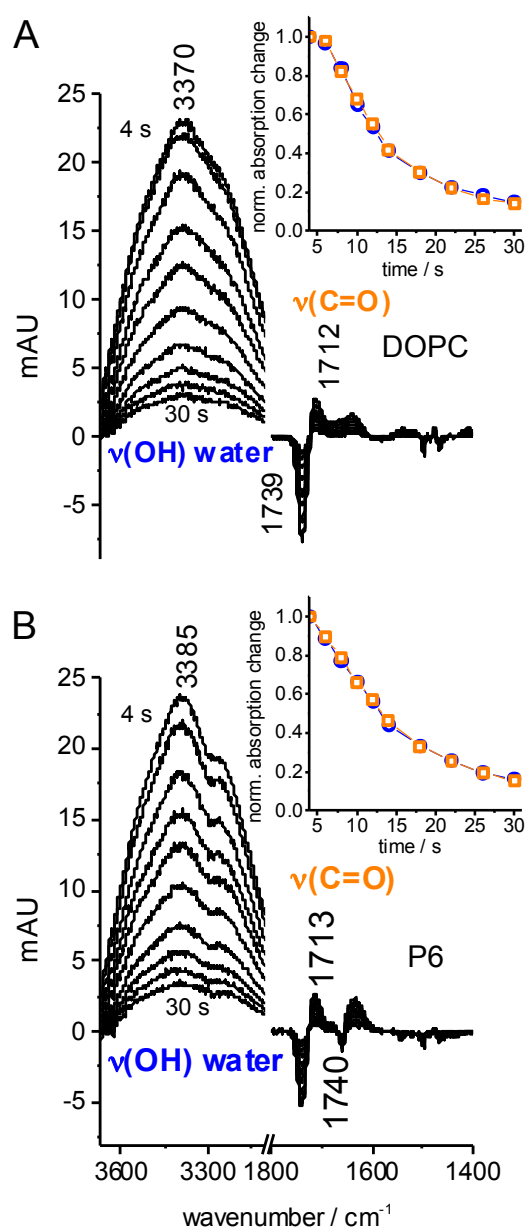


Figure 5: Time-dependent hydration-induced IR absorption changes in DOPC films. A) Decrease of the OH-stretching absorption of water and reduction of the lipid ester C=O stretching absorption difference band over time after the initial absorption changes were induced by a 4 s hydration pulse which increased the r.h. from 75% to 82% in a pure DOPC film. The increased H-bonding to the ester carbonyl led to its frequency downshift which caused the reduction of absorption at 1739  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (disappearance of the less hydrated state) and the increase at 1712  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (appearance of the more hydrated state). With the return to 75% r.h., both the water absorption and the C=O difference band vanish. Inset: reduction of the IR amplitudes at the water OH and lipid ester C=O stretching frequencies over time. B) Equivalent data for a DOPC film containing the peptide P6 (in addition to the absorption changes of water and DOPC, the amide I mode of the peptide also responds to the hydration pulse with a frequency shift in the 1660 to 1640  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  range). Color code:  $\nu(\text{C}=\text{O})$ : orange,  $\nu(\text{OH})$ : blue.

270 In contrast to the peptide-containing films, the opsins exhibited a slower re-equilibration of hydration water with  
 271 the gas phase, reaching the 90% recovery after one minute, rather than 30 s. However, the time courses reveal again

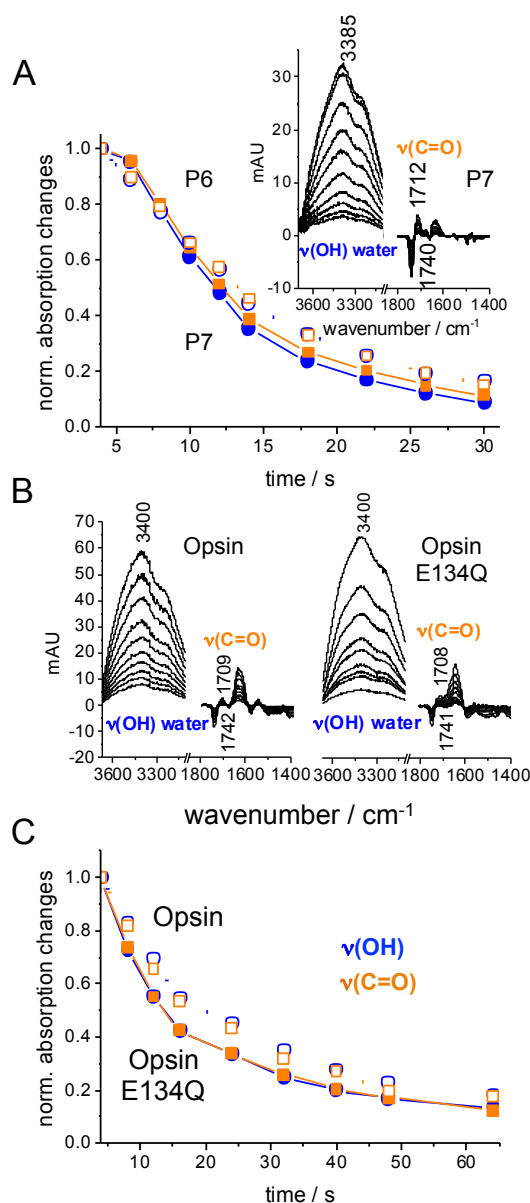


Figure 6: Hydration-induced IR absorption changes in lipid-reconstituted TM3 model peptides and full length opsin mutants. A) Comparison of the relaxation of water OH and lipid ester C=O stretching absorption bands of Glu<sup>27</sup>- and Gln<sup>27</sup>-containing peptides P6 and P7, respectively, in DOPC. Inset: the original time-dependent hydration-induced IR difference spectra of P7. B) IR absorption changes induced by hydration of two opsin mutants in DOPC. C) Comparison of the relaxation time course of the water OH (3400  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) and lipid ester C=O stretching absorption changes (around 1741/1709  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) of the opsin mutants reconstituted in DOPC carrying the natural Glu<sup>134</sup> (opsin) or the Gln<sup>134</sup> mutation. Color code as in Fig. 5.

272 a faster water re-equilibration for opsin with the amide-containing side chain at position 134 than with the carboxyl  
 273 of the native Glu<sup>134</sup> (Fig. 6 C). The different linkage of membrane hydration to sub-headgroup H-bonding is thus  
 274 a site-specific feature that prevails in both the full length receptor structure and the TM3 model peptides.

## 275 Discussion

276 Proton-uptake of the conserved E(D)RY motif of the TM3 domain of class A GPCRs is a crucial step in receptor  
277 activation. Here, we investigated the influence of protonation on the structure, dynamics, and membrane-insertion  
278 of corresponding model peptides in DOPC bilayers using both atomistic molecular dynamics simulations and fluo-  
279 rescence spectroscopy on peptides and full length opsin mutants. A coupling of carboxyl protonation to structural  
280 transitions was observed that is suggested to be of functional relevance in the full length receptor.

281 In active bovine rhodopsin structures (42–44), the side chain of the protonated Glu<sup>134</sup> in the class-conserved  
282 E(D)RY motif does not undergo specific intramolecular interactions. Instead, it resides in a hydrophobic region  
283 at the TM3-TM4 interface close to the lipid-facing protein surface. This contrasts the inactive state (45) where  
284 its ionized form participates in H-bonding and ionic interactions between Arg<sup>135</sup> and Glu<sup>247</sup> on TM6, i.e., the  
285 ionic lock that stabilizes the inactive state of the receptor. The MD calculations show that the E(D)RY motif  
286 forms a microdomain switch in the true sense: it is part of an independently folding transmembrane domain but  
287 adopts protonation-dependent structural sub-states that have counterparts in the crystal structures of inactive and  
288 active conformations of rhodopsin. This correspondence concerns in particular the protonation-induced increase in  
289 C-terminal helicity, and partially the transition from a *gauche* to a *trans* side chain rotamer for the P4 peptide  
290 enforced by the helix anchoring role of Trp<sup>31</sup>. In agreement with this interpretation, the absence of the Trp<sup>31</sup> anchor  
291 in P2 allows for a more substantial shift of the TM helix toward the C-terminal end when the Glu<sup>27</sup> side chain  
292 becomes ionized.

293 Membrane anchoring functions have also been described for tyrosines at TM helical ends (46). Remarkably, the  
294 potential of the charged side chain of Glu<sup>27</sup> to promote the TM3 peptide shift is not impeded by the tyrosine of the  
295 E(D)RY motif: Tyr<sup>29</sup> exhibits a three-fold larger displacement in P2 than in the tryptophan-anchored P4 peptide.  
296 This agrees with the strong effect of charged residues on TM helical end positioning (47, 48). Nevertheless, for both  
297 peptides the ionized state of Glu<sup>27</sup> favors a shift to the more hydrophilic membrane surface, whereas the protonated  
298 glutamic acid is preferentially located in the more hydrophobic sub-headgroup region of the bilayer.

299 Our data thus show a protonation-dependent partitioning of Glu<sup>27</sup> in regions of different hydrophobicity. This  
300 finding provides a molecular basis for the elevated pK<sub>a</sub> of Glu<sup>134</sup> in the MIIb to MIIbH<sup>+</sup> transition of light-activated  
301 rhodopsin. The results reveal further mechanistic details that have previously not been considered for the confor-  
302 mational switching process. First, the Glu<sup>27</sup> pK<sub>a</sub> responded differently to the dielectric environment in P2 and P5,  
303 revealing a crucial role of the different side chain rotamers for pK<sub>a</sub> regulation. Second, a glutamine is generally  
304 considered a mimic of a protonated glutamic acid. However, the corresponding replacements made in P3 and P5  
305 did not reproduce the effect of the protonated glutamic acid on stabilizing the C-terminal helical structure. This  
306 unexpected result hints at a crucial role of H-bond networks in addition to a side chain positioning within the  
307 dielectric gradient at the membrane interface.

308 Likewise, the rate of sub-headgroup hydration was shown to depend on a single amino acid replacement in the  
309 TM3 model peptide. The significant difference in carbonyl dehydration kinetics seen also with the opsin mutants  
310 leads us to suggest that the ionized carboxyl is a hydration site at the opsin lipid interface, where proton uptake  
311 can lead to more extended remodeling of H-bond networks in the membrane interface. This may explain why in  
312 full length rhodopsin in membranes, the Glu<sup>134</sup>Gln replacement leads to the loss of phosphodiester H-bond interac-  
313 tions normally seen in FTIR difference spectra of the formation of the MII G-protein complex (49). The described  
314 importance of the membrane interfacial region in these structural transitions provides a mechanistic rationale why  
315 Glu<sup>134</sup> protonation is required for full receptor activation in membranes but not in detergent (50).

316 In summary, the 'proton switch' mechanism of the E(D)RY motif can be understood on the basis of the dielectric  
317 properties of the membrane interface and the membrane-anchoring capability of the sequence context. Correspond-  
318 ingly, the proton-induced structural changes occur in both the isolated microdomain and the full length receptor.  
319 In both cases, the side chain carboxyl is additionally connected to the H-bond network in the membrane surface,  
320 which is required for secondary structure stabilization.

### 321 Author Contributions

322 RAB and KF designed research, AS performed simulations as well as the simulation analysis, RAB supervised  
323 simulation analysis, PR and SM prepared the opsin mutants, SE carried out the spectroscopic measurements, AS,  
324 KF, and RAB wrote the manuscript.

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