

A silicon-rhodamine chemical-genetic hybrid for far red voltage imaging from defined neurons in brain slice

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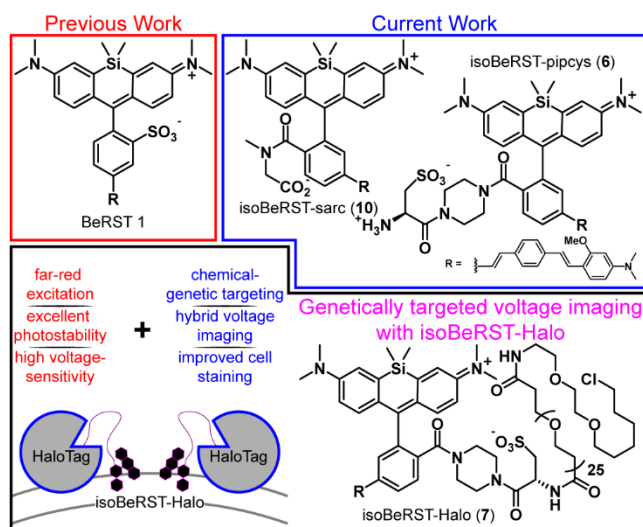
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Supporting Information Placeholder

ABSTRACT: We describe the design, synthesis, and application of voltage-sensitive silicon rhodamines. Based on the Berkeley Red Sensor of Transmembrane potential, or BeRST, scaffold, the new dyes possess an isomeric molecular wire for improved alignment in the plasma membrane and contain 2' carboxylic acids for ready functionalization. Conjugation with secondary amines affords tertiary amides that localize to cellular membranes and respond to voltage changes with a 24% $\Delta F/F$ per 100 mV. When combined with a flexible polyethyleneglycol (PEG) linker and a chloroalkane HaloTag ligand, the new indicators, or isoBeRST dyes, enable voltage imaging from genetically defined cells and neurons. Covalent ligation of isoBeRST to cell surface-expressed HaloTag enzymes provides up to 3-fold improved labeling over previous, rhodamine-based hybrid strategies. We show that isoBeRST-Halo hybrid indicators achieve single-trial voltage imaging of membrane potential dynamics from dissociated rat hippocampal neurons or mouse cortical neurons in brain slices. With far-red/near infrared excitation and emission, turn-on response to action potentials, effective cell labeling in thick tissue, and excellent photostability, the new isoBeRST-Halo derivatives provide an important complement to voltage imaging in neurobiology.

Voltage imaging in the central nervous system promises to transform the ways in which we observe brain systems.¹⁻² Recently, a number of approaches to voltage imaging have emerged, including methods that rely solely on synthetic dyes³⁻⁹ or genetically encoded proteins.¹⁰⁻¹⁷ Alternatively, hybrid methodologies can combine the unique properties of synthetic dyes—high molecular brightness, wide availability of colors, or fast response kinetics—with the cellular specificity of genetically encoded methods.¹⁸⁻²³ Our group recently reported the development of a completely synthetic voltage-sensitive fluorophore, Berkeley Red Sensor of Transmembrane potential 1, or BeRST 1, a silicon-rhodamine-based indicator that we hypothesize operates via voltage-sensitive photoinduced electron transfer (PeT).²⁴ The high sensitivity (24% $\Delta F/F$ per 100 mV), fast response kinetics, photostability, and far red/near infra-red excitation and emission profile have enabled the use of BeRST 1 in a number of voltage imaging applications.²⁵⁻³¹

Scheme 1. Overview of isoBeRST-Halo



However, the use of BeRST 1 has been largely restricted to *in vitro* systems of homogeneous cell types. Usage in more complex settings, like thick brain tissue, remains a challenge because of a lack of methods to genetically target BeRST 1 to defined cells. Here we report two new synthetic BeRST dyes and show that this new class of indicator can be combined with a genetically-encoded protein tether to enable voltage imaging from defined cells in mouse brain slice.

To enable genetic targeting of BeRST-style dyes, we redesigned the synthesis of BeRST. We replaced the 2'-sulfonate of BeRST with a carboxylate: this allows for addition of covalent tethers and mimics our previous design success with Rhodamine-based Voltage Reporters (RhoVRs).³²⁻³³ We also used the 5' version of molecular wire, since the 5', or isomeric, version showed improved voltage sensitivity compared to the 4' RhoVR.³² Additionally, the commercial availability of the precursors to the aldehyde starting material substantially simplified the synthetic route (**Scheme S1**). The optimized synthesis of isoBeRST-sarc **10** begins with a Heck reaction between fluorophore **134-35** and (*E*)-3-methoxy-*N,N*-dimethyl-4-(4-vinylstyryl)aniline³⁶ to obtain carboxy silicon rhodamine **8** (**Scheme S1**). Dye **8** is coupled to sarcosine *tert*-butyl ester using oxalyl chloride, followed

Scheme 2. Synthesis of isoBeRST-pipcys (6) and isoBeRST-Halo (7)

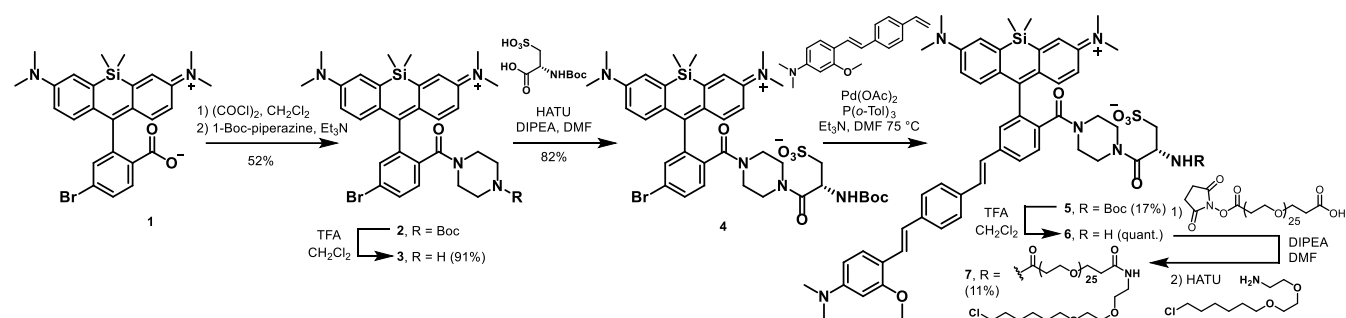


Table 1. Properties of isoBeRST indicators

Compound	λ_{\max} / nm ^a	λ_{em} / nm ^a	ϵ	$\Phi^{\text{a,b}}$	% $\Delta F/F$ / 100 mV ^c	Relative brightness ^d
isoBeRST-pipcys 6	662	681	172,000	0.061	24 ± 1.9	100%
isoBeRST-Halo 7	662	677	-	0.042	21 ± 1.2	30%
isoBeRST-sarc 10	661	681	107,700	0.098	24 ± 2.6	-

^aIn PBS, pH 7.4, 0.1% SDS. ^bReferenced to Cy5.5-carboxylic acid in PBS. ^cVoltage-clamped HEK cells. Error is ± S.D. for n = 5–6 cells. ^dIn HEK cells. Error is ± S.E.M for n = 4 coverslips (>100 cells per coverslip for relative brightness).

by a TFA-catalyzed deprotection of the *tert*-butyl ester to give the voltage-sensitive fluorophore isoBeRST-sarc **10**, which is the Si-rhodamine analog of RhoVR **1**.³²

We also synthesized the piperazine-cysteic acid conjugate of isoBeRST, or isoBeRST-pipcys **6**, since this configuration allowed us to target RhoVR dyes to specific cells using HaloTag (Scheme 2).³³ The synthesis of isoBeRST-pipcys **6** and isoBeRST-Halo **7** follows a sequential amide-coupling / Heck coupling sequence. This provided higher overall yields than amide coupling with the assembled molecular wire/fluorophore **8**. The cyclic, piperazine-derived tertiary amide of **3** appears more stable than the amide formed from sarcosine, based on its ability to undergo successful Pd-catalyzed synthesis of isoBeRST-pipcys **6**. The route begins with oxalyl chloride mediated coupling of reported silicon rhodamine **1** with 1-Boc-piperazine, followed by TFA deprotection to yield silicon rhodamine **2** (Scheme 2). A second coupling mediated by HATU installed Boc-L-cysteic acid, affording **3**. Compound **3** was then submitted to a Heck reaction with phenylene-vinylene wire. Subsequent TFA deprotection gives voltage-sensitive fluorophore isoBeRST-pipcys **6** in 17% yield. In a one-pot sequence, isoBeRST-pipcys **6** is reacted with acid-dPEG₂₅-NHS ester, followed by addition of HaloTag amine (Scheme 2) and HATU. The complete reaction was purified via preparative-scale HPLC to yield the genetically-targetable isoBeRST-Halo **7** in 11% yield.

Spectroscopic characterization of isoBeRST-sarc **10**, isoBeRST-pipcys **6**, and isoBeRST-Halo **7** reveals that all three voltage indicators possess similar photophysical properties (Table 1, Figures 1, S1, and S2). IsoBeRST-sarc **10** displays a λ_{\max} at 661 nm, similar to BeRST **1** (λ_{\max} = 658 nm) and identical to isoBeRST-pipcys **6** and isoBeRST-Halo **7**. IsoBeRST-sarc **10** possesses an emission maximum of 681 nm and a quantum yield (Φ) of 9.8%, while isoBeRST-pipcys **6** has an emission maximum of 681 nm and Φ of 6.1%. IsoBeRST-Halo **7** has an emission maximum of 677 nm and Φ of 4.2%.

All of the new Si-rhodamine indicators are voltage-sensitive. In human embryonic kidney (HEK) cells untargeted dyes isoBeRST-sarc **10** (Figure S1) and isoBeRST-pipcys **6** (Figure S2) localize to the plasma membrane and are voltage sensitive. IsoBeRST-pipcys **6** has a voltage sensitivity of 24% ± 2% $\Delta F/F$ per 100 mV (SNR = 110 ± 15), identical to BeRST **1** (24% ± 5% $\Delta F/F$ per 100 mV)²⁴ and to isoBeRST-sarc **10** (Table 1). We selected isoBeRST-pipcys **6** to evaluate in neurons because of the higher yielding synthesis and stability compared to isoBeRST-sarc **10**. In cultured rat hippocampal neurons, isoBeRST-pipcys **6** (500 nM) provided clear resolution of action potentials (Figure S3).

The genetically-targetable isoBeRST-Halo **7** selectively labels HEK cells expressing cell-surface HaloTag (Figure 1 and S4). We expressed HaloTag on the surface of mammalian cells using a fusion with a single-pass transmembrane domain.³³ At 500 nM isoBeRST-Halo **7**, cells expressing cell-surface HaloTag are approximately 14-fold brighter than un-transfected control cells (Figure S4f). At lower concentrations (50 nM), fluorescence intensity in HaloTag-expressing cells increases to approximately 30-fold over non-HaloTag expressing cells (Figure S4f). This is three times better contrast than RhoVR-Halo labeling (10–15 fold).³³ Although expression levels of HaloTag vary slightly with transient transfection, a screen of isoBeRST-Halo **7** concentrations reveals that HaloTag binding sites appear to saturate at around 50 to 100 nM (Figure S4f). The drop in contrast ratio, from ~30-fold at 50 nM to about 14-fold at 500 nM comes from a small increase in background staining in control cells (an increase of about 4 percentage points, from 5% to 9%). Importantly, isoBeRST **7** (50 nM) is voltage-sensitive, with a voltage sensitivity of 21% ± 1% $\Delta F/F$ per 100 mV and an SNR of 42 ± 7 (Figure 1 and Table 1). IsoBeRST-Halo **7** maintains about the same voltage sensitivity as isoBeRST-pipcys **6** (500 nM), indicating that the covalently tethered dye remains properly oriented in the plasma membrane (Table 1 and Figure 1).

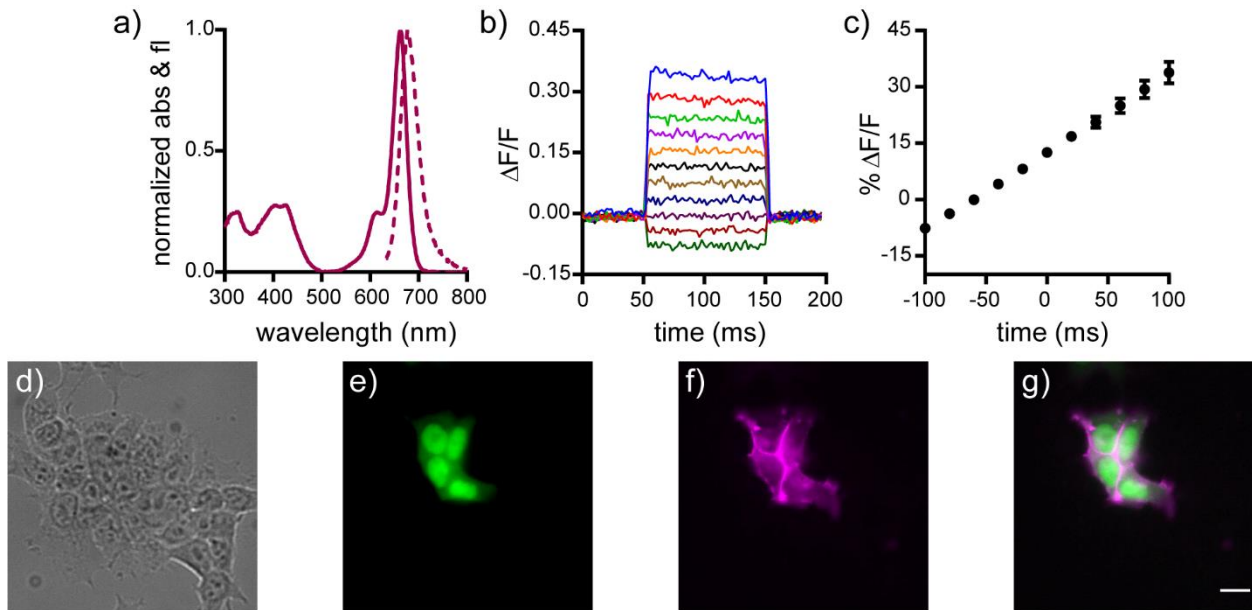


Figure 1. Cellular and *in vitro* characterization of isoBeRST-Halo 7. **a)** Normalized absorbance (solid line) and emission (dashed line) spectra of isoBeRST-Halo 7 in PBS, pH 7.4. **b)** Plot of the fractional change in fluorescence of 7 vs time for 100 ms hyper- and depolarizing steps (± 100 mV in 20 mV increments) from a holding potential of -60 mV for single HEK cells under whole-cell voltage-clamp mode. **c)** Plot of % $\Delta F/F$ vs final membrane potential. Data are mean \pm S.D. for $n = 6$ cells. **d-g)** Wide-field microscopy images of HEK cells transfected with CMV-HaloTag-pDisplay and stained with isoBeRST-Halo 7 (50 nM, 30 mins). **d)** DIC image of HEK cells. **e)** Nuclear EGFP fluorescence indicates HaloTag expression. **f)** isoBeRST-Halo fluorescence. **g)** Merge of fluorescence from EGFP (green) and isoBeRST-Halo (magenta). Scale bar is 10 μ m.

Covalently-tethered isoBeRST-Halo 7 visualizes voltage changes in genetically-defined neurons. Dissociated, cultured rat hippocampal neurons transfected with HaloTag under control of the synapsin promoter (to drive neuron-specific expression) were labeled with 50 nM isoBeRST-Halo. Neurons expressing HaloTag show excellent selectivity, revealing good localization of the dye to the outer membrane (**Figure 2 and S5**). The best contrast between HaloTag-expressing and control cells is achieved using 50 nM isoBeRST-Halo (50x brighter than untransfected cells) when compared to 100 nM isoBeRST-Halo (30x brighter than untransfected cells). High isoBeRST-Halo fluorescence correlates with high levels of HaloTag/GFP (**Figure S5e-g**). Using these optimized loading conditions, we demonstrated the ability to record spontaneous and evoked activity in neurons (**Figure 2e and Figure S6**). IsoBeRST-Halo responded to field stimulated evoked action potentials with a $10\% \pm 0.3\%$ $\Delta F/F$ and SNR of 15 ± 1 (19 cells).

We next evaluated the ability of isoBeRST-Halo 7 to monitor voltage dynamics from neurons in brain slice. We introduced genes for HaloTag and a co-expression marker, blue fluorescent protein, or BFP, on separate plasmids via *in utero* electroporation in mouse embryos.³⁷ We prepared tissue slices from the brains of these mice and stained the slices with isoBeRST-Halo 7 (250 to 500 nM, 15 min). Confocal fluorescence microscopy reveals localization of isoBeRST-Halo fluorescence in the cell membranes of neurons that express BFP and HaloTag (**Figure 3a,b**). Both cell bodies and more distal processes like axonal and dendritic membranes appear fluorescent (**Figure 3a,b and Figure S7**), mirroring results in dissociated rat neurons (**Figure 2**). Unlabeled

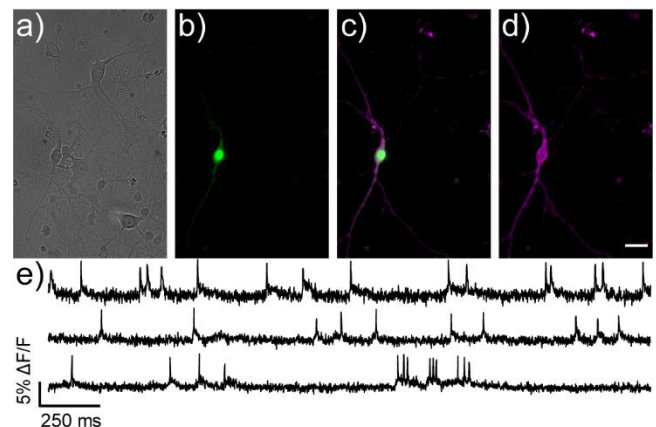


Figure 2. Monitoring spontaneous activity in neurons with isoBeRST-Halo 7. **a-d)** Wide-field microscopy images of isoBeRST-Halo in a HaloTag-expressing neuron. **a)** DIC image of neurons. **b)** Nuclear EGFP fluorescence indicates HaloTag expression. **c)** Merge of EGFP (green) and isoBeRST-Halo (magenta) fluorescence. **d)** isoBeRST-Halo fluorescence is restricted to the membrane. Scale bar is 20 μ m. **e)** Optical recordings at 500 Hz (1.94 W/cm²) of spontaneous activity shown as $\Delta F/F$ vs time for HaloTag-expressing neurons from different coverslips labeled with 7.

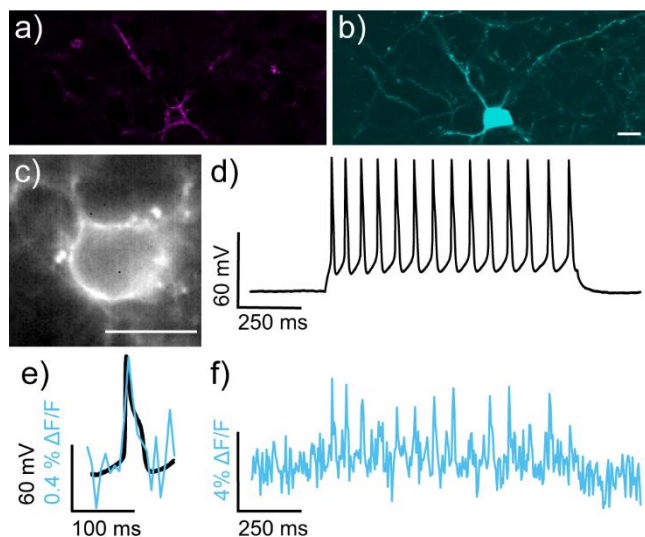


Figure 3. Characterization of isoBerST-Halo in mouse brain slice expressing HaloTag-pDisplay and pCAG-BFP. **a–b)** Confocal microscopy images of a HaloTag-expressing neuron stained with **a)** isoBerST-Halo (500 nM, 30 min, 23 °C) and expressing **b)** BFP. Scale bar is 20 μ m. **c)** Wide-field microscopy image of isoBerST-Halo stained slice acquired during patch-clamp electrophysiology. **d)** Plot of voltage vs. time for cell in panel (c). **e)** Overlay of membrane potential (black) and isoBerST-Halo fluorescence (teal). **f)** Plot of $\Delta F/F$ fluorescence from isoBerST-Halo fluorescence for the cell in panel (c). The $\Delta F/F$ trace was acquired at 0.5 kHz and represents single-trial acquisition.

cell bodies appear as dark spots, indicating that labeling of neurons requires HaloTag expression (**Figure S7**). In mouse brain slices, isoBerST-Halo is voltage-sensitive. Simultaneous patch clamp electrophysiology and fluorescence imaging establishes that isoBerST-Halo tracks action potentials in a single trial (**Figure 3c–f**). The voltage-sensitive fluorescence of isoBerST-Halo corresponds well with the electrode-based recording of action potentials (**Figure 3e**). IsoBerST-Halo **7** detects action potentials (**Figure 3f**) with a SNR of 4.9 ± 1.3 (S.D., $n = 10$ spikes) and a $\Delta F/F$ of $3.3\% \pm 0.6\%$ (S.D., $n = 10$ spikes). The sensitivity of isoBerST-Halo **7** in brain slices compares favorably to RhoVR-Halo, which has a higher voltage sensitivity (34%) than isoBerST-Halo (21%) in HEK cells and has an SNR of 3.3 and a $\Delta F/F$ of 4.3% in brain slice.³³

In summary, we describe the design, synthesis, and application of a new silicon-rhodamine-based voltage-sensitive fluorophores. The new BerST derivatives rely on a 2' carboxylate, rather than sulfonate, and can be combined with secondary amines to generate tertiary amides that function well as voltage indicators in their own right, with $\Delta F/F$ values matching the sulfonated-based BerST **1**.²⁴ Unlike BerST **1**, however, the new carboxy-containing isoBerST derivatives reported here can be readily incorporated into a hybrid genetic targeting framework. When combined in this way, isoBerST-Halo (**7**) enables selective labeling of cells expressing cell-surface HaloTag, including HEK293T cells, dissociated rat hippocampal neurons, and cortical neurons in mouse brain slices. Labeling with isoBerST-Halo provides improved contrast between HaloTag-expressing and non-expressing cells, compared to RhoVR-Halo.³³ In all of these contexts, isoBerST-Halo is voltage-sensitive, with $\Delta F/F$ values comparable to the parent BerST **1** indicator.

Voltage imaging with isoBerST-Halo (**7**) provides an important complement to voltage imaging efforts. It offers a turn-on indicator for action potentials, possesses an excitation spectrum aligned with common excitation sources, operates in the far-red / near infrared, and takes advantage of the high photostability of silicon-rhodamines.²⁴ In the future, we will maximize expression of cell-surface HaloTag, since one limitation of the covalent tethering approach is that the stoichiometric labeling limits the number of indicators that can be added to a cell membrane. Finally, we envision that isoBerST-Halo can pair with optically³³ and enzymatically orthogonal hybrid genetic labeling strategies^{38–40} to provide multi-color voltage imaging in complex tissues.

Supporting Information

Supplementary data, including supporting figures, spectra, procedures, and analysis. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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