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Giant Voltage Modulation of Magnetic Anisotropy in Strained Heavy Metal/Magnet/Insulator Heterostructures

P. V. Ong,1 Nicholas Kioussis,1, * D. Odkhuu,1 P. Khalili Amiri,2 K. L. Wang,2 and Gregory P. Carman3

1Department of Physics and Astronomy, California State University Northridge, Northridge, California 91330, USA
2Department of Electrical Engineering, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA
3Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, University of California, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA

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Ab initio electronic structure calculations reveal that epitaxial strain has a dramatic effect on the voltage-controlled magnetic anisotropy (VCMA) in Ta/FeCo/MgO junctions. Strain can give rise to a wide range of novel VCMA behavior where the MA can change from a ∨- to a ∧-shape electric-field dependence with giant VCMA coefficients which are asymmetric under voltage reversal. The underlying mechanism is the interplay of the strain- and electric field-induced changes of the spin-orbit coupled d-states at the interfaces and the strain-induced modification of the dielectric constant of MgO. These findings demonstrate the feasibility of highly sensitive VCMA through strain engineering, which may provide a viable avenue for tailoring magnetoelectric properties for spintronic applications.

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Even though the switching of magnetization in magnetic random access memory (MRAM) bits using spin-polarized currents via the spin transfer torque (STT) effect has proven very successful [1], it requires high current densities and hence high power consumption. Furthermore, the switching energy per bit (∼ 100 fJ) of STT-RAM are still around two orders of magnitude higher compared with complementary metal oxide semiconductor switching energies of ∼ 1 fJ [2]. A highly promising approach for developing ultra-low power, highly-scalable, and non-volatile spin based RAMs is the voltage-controlled magnetic anisotropy (VCMA) of heavy-metal/ferromagnet/insulator (HM/FM/I) nanojunctions via the magnetoelectric effect (MeRAM) [3–6], where the non-magnetic HM contact electrode (Ta, Pd, Pt, Au) has strong spin-orbit coupling (SOC). In the low-bias regime the VCMA is proportional to the electric field (E-field) in the insulator, \( VCMA = \beta E_I = \beta E_{ext} \), where \( \beta \) is the VCMA coefficient, \( \varepsilon \) is the dielectric constant of the I, and \( E_{ext} \) is the external E-field. The challenge for achieving a switching bit energy below 1fJ and a write voltage below 1V requires large perpendicular MA (PMA) [4, 7] and \( \beta \geq 200 \frac{fJ}{(V/m)} \). [2]

The VCMA of HM/FM/I junctions exhibits a wide range of behavior ranging from linear with positive or negative \( \beta \) to nonmonotonic ∨-shape or inverse-∨-shape (∧) E-field dependence with asymmetric \( \beta \)'s. On the experimental side, a linear VCMA was observed in epitaxial Au/FeCo/MgO [8] and in Ta/Cu40Fe40B20/MgO [9] tunnel junctions with \( \beta \) of ∼38 and ∼33fJ/(Vm), respectively, where the convention of positive E-field corresponds to accumulation of electrons in the FM/I interface. On the other hand, a ∨-shape VCMA was found in Au/Fe/MgO[5]. Furthermore, in Ta/Cu40Fe40B20/MgO/Cu40Fe40B20 junctions the coercivity of the bottom FM electrode decreases linearly with voltage with \( \beta \approx 50 \frac{fJ}{(V/m)} \) while that of the top FM electrode exhibits a ∨-shape voltage behavior [6].

Recent experiments in Pd/FePd/MgO [10], V/Fe/MgO [11], and MgO/FeB/MgO/Fe [12] junctions show a linear, ∧- and ∨-shape VCMA with giant \( \beta \) values of about 600, 1150, and 100 fJ/(V/m), respectively. While in general the underlying mechanism remains unresolved, a possible origin of the nonmonotonic VCMA in V/Fe/MgO may be due to the internal E-field caused by charges trapped by defects in MgO [11]. On the theoretical side, ab initio electronic structure calculations of Fe/MgO [13] and Au/Fe/MgO [14] junctions with in-plane lattice constants of Fe and MgO, respectively, predicted a linear VCMA with \( \beta \) of about +130 and +70 fJ/(V/m), respectively.

The fairly large lattice mismatch (4-5%) between the I, the FM and HM layers in these heterostructures invites several intriguing and important questions which remain unexplored. What is the effect of strain on the: (1) VCMA behavior and its coefficients (2) dielectric constant and hence the \( E_I \)? (3) critical field where the MA reaches its maximum or minimum value? The purpose of this Letter is to employ ab initio electronic structure calculations to understand the effect of epitaxial strain on the VCMA behavior of the Ta/FeCo/MgO junction and reconcile the origin of the experimental controversies. We demonstrate that the strain can selectively tune the VCMA from ∨- to ∧-shape with giant VCMA coefficients which are asymmetric upon E-field switching.

The ab initio electronic structure calculations have been carried out within the framework of the projector augmented-wave formalism [15], as implemented in the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) [16, 17], with the generalized gradient approximation [18] for the
The slab supercell for the Ta/FeCo/MgO (001) junction along [001] consists of three monolayers (MLs) of bcc Ta on top of three MLs of B2-type FeCo on top of seven MLs of rock-salt MgO and a 15Å-thick vacuum region. The O atoms at the FeCo/MgO interface are placed atop of Fe atoms. We denote with Fe1 and Fe2 [inset in Fig. 1(a)] the atoms at the Fe/MgO and Fe/Ta interfaces, respectively. The expansive strain, ηFeCo, on the FeCo film is varied from zero to 4% to simulate the effect of in-plane strain under experimental conditions [19]. At each strain, the magnetic and electronic degrees of freedom and atomic positions along [001] are relaxed in the presence of the E-field. Employing a 31×31×1 k-point mesh, the MA per unit interfacial area, A, is determined from MA=[E100−E001]/A, where E100 and E001 are the total energies with magnetization along the [100] and [001] directions, respectively.

Effect of strain on zero-field MA — Fig. 1(a) shows the strain dependence of the zero-field MA of the FeCo/MgO junction. We find that the MA decreases almost linearly with increasing strain and undergoes a transition from an out-of- to in-plane magnetization at ~ ηFeCo =+2.5%. From the strain dependence of the MA (see Supplemental material) we find that the effective interfacial uniaxial magneto-crystalline anisotropy, K∥ =1.41 erg/cm², and the interfacial magnetoelastic coefficient B∥ =−18.81 erg/cm².

Furthermore, epitaxial strain has a large effect on the dielectric constant of MgO which in turn controls the magnitude of Ef at the FM/I interface. Employing density-functional calculations as implemented in the PWSCF package[20], we display in Fig. 1(b) the out-of, (ε∥) and in-plane (ε⊥) components of the relative dielectric tensor of bulk MgO versus in-plane strain. We find that ε∥ increases exponentially from its zero-strain value of 9.8 with increasing compressive ηMgO strain indicating a decrease of Ef. This result is further corroborated by independent VASP slab calculations for the Ta/FeCo/MgO junction, where ε∥ (open circles) is determined from the ratio of the E-field in vacuum to that in MgO, where the latter is determined from the change of the planar average electrostatic potential.

To elucidate the mechanism of the strain effect on the zero-field MA, we show in Figs. 1(c), (d), and (e) the energy- and k-resolved distribution of the minority-spin band of the Fe1-derived dz², dz²/y² and dx²−y² states along the ΓM symmetry direction for ηFeCo = 0, 2 and 4%, respectively. We find that the strain-induced change of the zero-field MA arises primarily from changes of the band structure of the Fe1 interfacial atom. We have employed both the total energy method and the force theorem [21] MA = ∑kMA(k) to calculate the effect of strain on the MA. The k-resolved MA(k) ≈ ∑nεgcr(ε(n,k)[100] − ε(n,k)[001]) in the 2D Brillouin zone (BZ) is shown in Figs. 1(f), (g), and (h) for ηFeCo = 0, 2 and 4%, respectively. Here, ε(n,k)[100]/[001]) are the eigenvalues of the Hamiltonian for magnetization along the [100] ([001]) direction. Using the force theorem we find that MA = 1.98, 0.69, and −0.83 erg/cm² for ηFeCo = 0, 2 and 4%, respectively. These values agree well with those obtained from total energy calculations of 1.43, 0.61, and −0.83 erg/cm² for the corresponding strain values. Within second-order perturbation theory the MA can be expressed as [22]

\[ MA \propto \xi^2 \sum_{\alpha,\mu} \frac{|\langle \Psi_\alpha | \hat{L}_\mu | \Psi_\mu \rangle|^2 - |\langle \Psi_\alpha | \hat{L}_x | \Psi_\mu \rangle|^2}{E_\mu - E_\alpha}, \]

where \( \Psi_\alpha (E_\mu) \) and \( \Psi_\mu (E_\mu) \) are the one-electron occupied and unoccupied minority-spin states (energies) of band index \( \alpha \) and wave vector \( \mathbf{k} \) (omitted for simplicity), \( \xi \) is the SOC, and \( \hat{L}_\mu \) is the \( \mu \) component of the orbital angular momentum operator. This expression is valid when the majority band is full and the SOC between states of opposite spin can be ignored. Analysis of the density of states and the energy- and k-resolved
distribution of d-orbitals shows that the majority-spin states of the interfacial Fe1 and Fe2 atoms are well below 0.5 eV from the Fermi level. Therefore, the spin-flip contribution is negligible. In the analysis below the wave functions are projected on the d-orbitals.

At zero strain, the maxima of MA(\(\parallel \Gamma \)) in Fig. 1(f) occur around \(\Gamma\) along the \(\Gamma M\) (BZP1) and \(\Gamma X\) (BZP2) directions and around \(\frac{1}{4} \Gamma M\) (BZP3). The underlying origin of the MA maxima at BZP1 and BZP2 is the SOC between the minority-spin interfacial Fe1-derived occupied \(d_{xy}\) and \(d_{xz(yz)}\) states with the unoccupied \(d_{x^2-y^2}\) and \(d_{y^2(z^2)}\) states, respectively, in Fig. 1(c), through the \(\hat{L}_z\) operator. On the other hand, the MA maximum at BZP3 is due to the large SOC \(\langle x^2 - y^2 | \hat{L}_z | xy \rangle\) and \(\langle xz(yz) | \hat{L}_z | xz(yz) \rangle\) of Fe1.

Overall, increase of strain induces large downward shifts of the minority-spin bands of the Fe1-derived \(d_{xy}\) and \(d_{xz(yz)}\) states and upward energy shifts of the \(d_{x^2-y^2}\) bands along the \(\Gamma M\) direction. This leads to substantial rearrangement of occupied and unoccupied bands and hence large changes of the matrix elements of the \(\hat{L}_z\) and \(\hat{L}_x\) operators throughout the 2D BZ. Thus, at 2% strain the SOC \(\langle x^2 - y^2 | \hat{L}_z | xz(yz) \rangle\) at BZP1 becomes dominant rendering the k-resolved MA(BZP1) <0 [blue ring around \(\Gamma\) in Fig. 1(g)]. Furthermore, the increase of energy splitting between the occupied \(d_{xy}\)- and unoccupied \(d_{xz(yz)}\)-derived bands as well as between the occupied \(d_{xz(yz)}\)- and unoccupied \(d_{y^2(z^2)}\)-derived bands at BZP3 leads to a decrease of the k-resolved MA(BZP3). Note, that under 2% strain the rearrangement of bands shifts the MA maximum from BZP1 to BZP’ due to large SOC \(\langle xy | \hat{L}_z | x^2 - y^2 \rangle\) [Fig. 1(g)]. Under 4% strain, the Fe1 \(d_{xy}\) shifts further down in energy [Fig. 1(e)] leading to a reduction of MA at BZP’ and BZP3. The Fe1 SOC \(\langle yz(zz) | \hat{L}_z | x^2 - y^2 \rangle\) around \(\Gamma\) becomes dominant resulting in the out-of-to in-plane magnetization transition.

**Effect of strain on VCMA** — The variation of the MA as a function of the E-field in MgO is shown in Fig. 2(a), (b) and (c) for \(\eta_{FeCo} = 0, 2\) and \(4\)% respectively. The results reveal that strain can have a dramatic effect on the VCMA, which changes from (i) \(\psi\)-shape at zero strain with giant \(\beta\) values of -648 (486) \(\mu J/(V.m)\) for negative (positive) E-field; to (ii) symmetric \(\wedge\)-shape at 2% strain with \(\beta\) values of +252 (-241) \(\mu J/(V.m)\) for negative (positive) E-field; and to (iii) asymmetric \(\wedge\)-shape at 4% strain with \(\beta\) values of +189 (-238) \(\mu J/(V.m)\). Note that at 4% the MA reaches its maximum value at \(E_f = 0.93\) V/nm which is close to the breakdown voltage of the MgO film (~1 V/nm). Consequently, the experimentally measured VCMA appears linear. The underlying origin presumably arises from the fact that the interface bands depend on the magnetization direction due to the Rashba effect. The Rashba coupling, which is proportional to the net electric field, \(E_z\), at the interface, has contributions from both the internal and external fields. The critical field where the MA reaches its maximum or minimum value depends on the interplay between the two E-fields, where the internal E-field can be tuned via strain. Interestingly, recent experiments have reported the influence of the internal E-field at the FM/I interface on the voltage-dependent tunneling anisotropic magnetoresistance.[23]

These VCMA coefficient values are the highest reported today and are larger by about an order of magnitude compared to most experimental values, except for those reported in Refs.[10, 11] where charged defects may play a role. Furthermore, our predicted \(\beta\)’s are close to or larger than the value of ~200 \(\mu J/(V.m)\) required to achieve a switching bit energy below 1fJ in the next-generation MeRAMs. Thus, our results demonstrate that the VCMA and its coefficients can be selectively tuned via proper epitaxial strain engineering. The even dependence of the MA on E-field is not only of potential interest for MeRAM, but also for STT-RAM with PMA, via proper epitaxial strain engineering. The critical field dependence of \(\Delta m_o\) of the Co and Ta1 atoms is not shown because is much weaker. For single atomic species FMs with large exchange splitting the MA is related with the orbital moment anisotropy via the Bruno expression \(MA = \xi \Delta m_o / (4\mu B)\). [24] This expression needs to be modified for structures consisting of multiple atomic species with strong hybridization [25]. Nevertheless, overall the results show that the E-field dependence of \(\Delta m_o\) for Fe2 (and to a lesser degree for Fe1) correlates well with that of the MA for all strain val-

![FIG. 2. (Color online) (a), (b), and (c) MA versus E-field in MgO for different strain values. (d), (e), and (f) Orbital moment difference, \(\Delta m_o = m_o^{[001]} - m_o^{[100]}\), of the Fe1 and Fe2 interfacial atoms versus E-field for the same strain values.](image-url)
Furthermore, $\Delta m_o > 0$ for Fe1 while $\Delta m_o < 0$ for the Fe2 atom (except for $E > 0$ at 4%), indicating that the Fe2/Ta interface favors in-plane MA in agreement with experiment [26]. This is due to the fact that, in contrast to Fe1, the Fe2-derived $d_{x^2-y^2}$ density of states around the Fermi energy is low leading to a decrease of $\langle x^2-y^2 \rangle$ over $L_z$. Consequently, the SOC between the occupied $d_{xy}$- and unoccupied $d_{x^2-y^2}$-derived Fe2 states through $L_z$ becomes dominant.

In order to understand the VCMA behavior under zero strain we show in Fig. 3(a) the field-induced $\Delta MA(k)$ = MA(k, $E = 0$) (green curves) and $\Delta MA(k, E = -0.37$ V/nm) (solid red curves) field, respectively. We show the dominant Fe1 and Ta $d$-derived states. E-field induced $\Delta MA(k)$ (in meV) in 2D BZ for $E = -0.37$ V/nm and +0.37 V/nm, respectively. The numbered vertical lines in (b) and (c) correspond to the numbered peaks in (a). The positive peaks in Fig. 3(a) correspond to the numbered peaks in (a), (d) and (e).

Under $+0.37$ V/nm both the Ta1 occupied $d_{xy}$- and unoccupied $d_{x^2-y^2}$-derived bands around $\Gamma M$ do not shift [Fig. 3(c)] and hence $\Delta MA(k) \rightarrow 0$ [Fig. 3(a)]. On the other hand, a new peak in $\Delta MA(k)$ develops around $\Gamma X$ [peak 4 in Figs. 3(a) and (e)] due to the fact that both Fe1 occupied $d_{xy}$- and unoccupied $d_{x^2-y^2}$-derived bands (coupled through $L_z$) shift up in energy rendering the $d_{xy}$ states partially occupied. Thus, the out-of-plane contribution to $MA(k)$ is enhanced.

At $\eta_{FeCo} = 2\%$ the E-field-induced $\Delta MA(k)$ is plotted along the high symmetry directions in Fig. 4(a) for $E = \pm 0.58$ V/nm. The shift of the zero-field minority spin bands (dotted curves) are shown in Figs. 4(b) and (c) for E-field of $-0.58$ V/nm (green curves) and $+0.58$ V/nm (red curves), respectively. Figs. 4(d) and (e) display $\Delta MA(k)$ in the 2D-BZ for field of $-0.58$ V/nm and $+0.58$ V/nm, respectively. Integration of $\Delta MA(k)$ over the 2D BZ for negative and positive field yields induced MA values consistent with the $\land$-shape of the VCMA at 2% strain in Fig. 2(b). Since for both field directions $\Delta MA < 0$, we focus on the main negative $\Delta MA(k)$ troughs (1 and 2) in Figs. 4(a), (d), and (e) around $\Gamma X$ and near $\overline{X}$. Their origin lies on the field-induced shift of the Fe1 $d_{x^2-y^2}$-derived bands from above to below the Fermi level [Fig. 4(b) and (c)] and the concomitant SOC of these states with the unoccupied Fe1 $d_{x^2-y^2}$ bands via $L_z$, resulting in $\Delta MA< 0$.

In summary, we have demonstrated that epitaxial strain, which is ubiquitous in many HM/FM/I trilayers, has a dramatic effect on the VCMA. It can change the

![Fig. 3](image1.png)

![Fig. 4](image2.png)
VCMA from a ∨- to a ∧-shape E-field dependence with giant VCMA coefficients. Furthermore, the critical field where the MA reaches its maximum or minimum value can be controlled selectively via strain tuning. These findings, which are general for other HM/FM/I junctions with different HM cap [27], open interesting prospects for exploiting strain engineering to harvest higher efficiency VCMA for the next generation MeRAM devices.

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* nick.kioussis@csun.edu