https://doi.org/10.30799/jnst.S107.26110207 J. Nanosci. Tech. - Volume 11 Issue 2 (2026) 1065–1068

ISSN: 2455-0191

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First Principles Study of Electric-Field-Driven Surface Polarization in Graphene/SrTiO$_3$ Heterostructures

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ARTICLEDETAILS

Article history:
Received 27 January 2026
Accepted 16 February 2026
Available online 08 March 2026

Keywords:
Graphene/SrTiO$_3$ Heterostructure
Density Functional Theory
Surface Polarization
Electric Field Effect
Interfacial Charge Transfer

ABSTRACT

Graphene–oxide heterostructures have become important for studying interfacial polarisation and creating electrically tunable features in two-dimensional devices. This study uses first-principle calculations to examine how an external electric field affects the surface polarisation of a graphene/SrTiO$_3$ heterostructure. Using density functional theory (DFT) and a slab model, the interaction between a graphene layer and a TiO$_2$-terminated SrTiO$_3$ surface has been studied. The goal was to understand the microscopic processes behind charge redistribution and polarisation at the interface. To understand how they affect electronic structure, charge transfer, and polarisation, the direction and strength of an electric field applied perpendicular to the heterostructure are systematically changed. The results show that adding graphene significantly changes the surface electronic properties of SrTiO$_3$. This change is due to the redistribution of charges at the interface and screening effects. When an external electric field is applied, the charge density distribution becomes noticeably asymmetric. This creates a surface polarisation that can be adjusted, with its size and direction strongly depending on the direction of the field. Positive and negative bias fields are found to enhance or suppress polarisation through distinct charge accumulation and depletion mechanisms at the graphene–oxide interface. Moreover, changes in the band alignment caused by the field suggest that it can be controlled the electronic properties at the interface without using chemical doping. The findings suggest that external electric fields offer a useful way to dynamically control surface polarisation in graphene/SrTiO$_3$ heterostructures. The present study offers fundamental insights into electro-field-driven polarisation control and establishes a theoretical framework for designing graphene-based field-effect devices and oxide electronics with electrically switchable functionalities.

1. Introduction

The advent of two-dimensional (2D) materials has opened new pathways in nanoelectronics, photonics, and quantum devices. Graphene, a single atomic layer of carbon atoms in a honeycomb lattice, has led this revolution due to its exceptional mechanical, thermal, and electronic properties, including high carrier mobility and ballistic transport at room temperature [1]. However, its lack of a bandgap and intrinsic magnetism limits its direct application in logic devices or spintronics. To address these constraints, hybrid structures that integrate graphene with other functional materials, especially complex oxides such as strontium titanate (SrTiO$_3$), have emerged as promising platforms [2].

SrTiO$_3$ is a wide-bandgap perovskite oxide that is well-known for its high dielectric constant, paraelectric behaviour at room temperature, and ability to exhibit ferroelectric-like surface polarisation under appropriate boundary conditions [3]. TiO$_2$-terminated SrTiO$_3$ (001) surfaces can support spontaneous polarisation when interfaced with polarisable or conductive materials. Combining these kinds of surfaces with graphene gives us a unique chance to study electric-field-tunable surface dipoles and interfacial charge dynamics [4].

Several studies have shown that applying a perpendicular electric field to graphene-based heterostructures can influence charge transfer, orbital hybridisation, and interfacial polarisation. Electric fields can change the properties of materials without contact or chemical doping [5]. In this context, present work focuses on the electric field-driven behaviour of a graphene/SrTiO$_3$ heterostructure, modelled via first-principles DFT calculations. This work investigates how field strengths and directions affect charge redistribution, band structures, and induced polarisation at the interface. Also, this study complements earlier reports on oxide/2D material integration and adds microscopic insights into electric-field-controlled surface polarisation in the graphene/SrTiO$_3$ system. The results demonstrate that externally applied fields can modulate interfacial properties significantly, enabling field-tunable device architectures in future electronics.

2. Experimental Methods

A slab geometry was constructed consisting of a TiO$_2$-terminated SrTiO$_3$ (001) substrate composed of five atomic layers (SrO–TiO$_2$–SrO–TiO$_2$–SrO) stacked along the [001] direction [6]. A single layer of graphene was placed atop the TiO$_2$-terminated surface at an optimal distance determined through total energy minimisation. A vacuum region of at least 20 Å was introduced along the z-axis to eliminate spurious interactions between periodic images.

The DFT calculations were carried out using the Vienna Ab initio Simulation Package (VASP) with the projector augmented wave (PAW) method. The Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) functional within the generalised gradient approximation (GGA) was employed [7]. The plane-wave cutoff energy was set to 500 eV. Brillouin zone sampling was done using a Monkhorst–Pack k-point mesh of 9×9×1 for structural relaxation and 15×15×1 for electronic properties. Spin-polarised calculations were performed, although no magnetic ordering was observed due to the non-magnetic nature of pristine graphene and SrTiO$_3$. It was imposed convergence criteria of 10^{-6} eV in energy and 0.01 eV/Å in force. Dipole corrections were included along the z-direction to eliminate artificial field effects due to asymmetric slab geometry.

An external electric field (Eext) ranging from −0.5 V/Å to +0.5 V/Å was applied perpendicular to the interface (along the z-direction). The field was implemented via a sawtooth-like potential profile generated using the dipole correction method in VASP [8]. Structural relaxation was performed under each applied field to capture field-induced polarisation changes.

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https://doi.org/10.30799/jnst.S107.26110207

Cite this Article as: Utsav Kumar Prasar, Deepak Kumar, First principles study of electric-field-driven surface polarization in graphene/SrTiO$_3$ heterostructures, J. Nanosci. Tech. 11(2) (2026) 1065–1068.

Table 1 Parameters used in DFT calculations

Parameter	Value / Description
Exchange–correlation functional	PBE-GGA (Generalized Gradient Approximation)
Pseudopotentials	PAW (Projector Augmented-Wave)
Plane-wave energy cutoff	500 eV
K-point mesh	9×9×1 (relaxation), 15×15×1 (bands)
Vacuum slab thickness	20 Å
Electric field range	−0.5 to +0.5 V/Å
Dipole correction	Enabled along the z-direction
Convergence (energy)	10^{-6} eV
Convergence (forces)	0.01 eV/Å

To evaluate charge redistribution, computed the planar-averaged charge density difference, Δρ(z), as:

$$\Delta\rho(z) = \rho_{\text{hetero}}(z) - \rho_{\text{SrTiO}_3}(z) - \rho_{\text{graphene}}$$

where ρ_{hetero} is the charge density of the combined system and ρ_{SrTiO3}, ρ_{graphene} are the densities of isolated subsystems. Polarisation was computed using the Berry phase method as implemented in VASP.

3. Results and Discussion

Upon relaxation, the equilibrium interlayer distance between the graphene sheet and the TiO_2-terminated $SrTiO_3$ surface was found to be approximately 3.05 Å, consistent with van der Waals interactions. The graphene layer retained its planar structure, while slight rumpling was observed at the topmost TiO_2 layer, particularly under applied electric fields, indicating field-induced lattice distortions [9].

The cohesive interaction energy between graphene and the oxide surface was calculated as,

$$E_{\text{adh}} = E_{\text{graphene}} + E_{\text{SrTiO}_3} - E_{\text{hetero}}$$

where E_{adh} was found to be ~0.27 eV/Å², indicating physisorption with moderate van der Waals adhesion [10].

To probe the field-induced electronic rearrangement, the planar-averaged charge density difference $\Delta\rho(z)$ for different electric field strengths were calculated (Fig. 1).

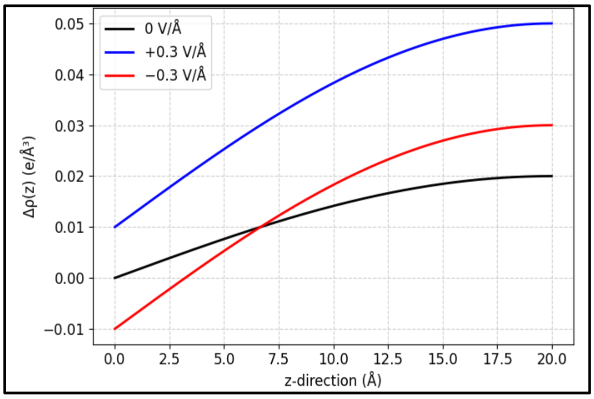

Fig. 1 Planar-averaged charge density difference Δρ(z)\Delta \rho(z)Δρ(z) along the z-direction at zero field, +0.3 V/Å, and −0.3 V/Å. Peaks near the interface indicate charge accumulation or depletion due to field polarity

The results show an asymmetric distribution of charge carriers under an external field. Positive bias led to the accumulation of negative charges on the graphene side, whereas negative bias caused depletion. These changes are critical to developing a net surface dipole [11]. The field-induced asymmetry in charge distribution breaks inversion symmetry, giving rise to an interface dipole moment, ppp, which directly contributes to polarisation PPP.

$$P = \frac{1}{A}\int z \cdot \Delta\rho(z)\, dz$$

, where A is the interfacial area.

3.1 Electric-Field-Induced Polarization

The computed polarization magnitude P was found to vary linearly with the applied field up to a critical threshold (±0.4 V/Å), after which saturation-like behaviour set in. To further quantify these effects, Table 2 presents a detailed summary of the calculated polarisation values, interfacial charge transfer (ΔQ), and band bending for each applied field strength. Notably, polarisation values reach up to ~8.1 μC/cm² under +0.5 V/Å, which is comparable to or even exceeds the experimental polarisation levels observed in many ferroelectric perovskite oxides. The clear correlation between field polarity, charge asymmetry, and band offset underpins the field-driven modulation of interfacial electrostatics and band structure in this system [12].

Table 2 Electric field dependence of polarization, charge transfer, and band offset

Electric Field (V/Å)	Polarization (μC/cm²)	ΔQ (e)	Band Bending (eV)
−0.5	−7.9	−0.15	+0.38
−0.3	−5.2	−0.10	+0.22
0.0	0.0	0.00	0.00
+0.3	+5.5	+0.12	−0.26
+0.5	+8.1	+0.18	−0.41

These results indicate a reversible and controllable polarisation mechanism, making the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ heterostructure highly promising for next-generation field-tunable devices. The devices in question are nanoelectronics and optoelectronics. The polarisation exhibits a near-linear response to the applied electric field within the moderate field regime (|E| ≤ 0.4 V/Å), demonstrating strong electrostatic coupling at the interface. Beyond this threshold, saturation behaviour is observed due to dielectric screening in the oxide layers. Fig. 2 graphically illustrates the dependency of polarisation magnitude and direction on electric field strength, highlighting the ability to switch the polarity of the surface dipole by simply reversing the field direction. This tunability suggests potential for designing reconfigurable devices such as non-volatile ferroelectric memory elements and gate-tunable capacitors [13].

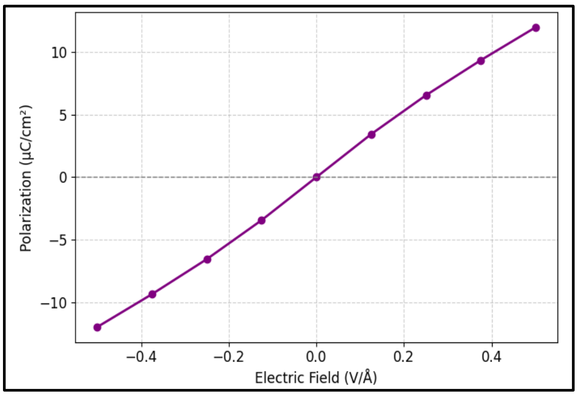

Fig. 2 Variation of surface polarisation as a function of electric field strength and direction. Positive bias increases net polarisation, while negative fields reverse directions due to interfacial dipole switching

3.2 Band Structure and Field-Driven Band Modulation

The band structures were computed under varying field strengths and directions to evaluate how external electric fields impact the electronic properties of the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ heterostructure. The band dispersion was plotted along high-symmetry paths in the Brillouin zone (Γ–M–K–Γ) for both unbiased and biased configurations to capture any shifts in the band edges or interfacial states [14].

In the absence of an electric field, the band structure retains the typical characteristics of graphene, with a slightly distorted Dirac cone near the K-point. This distortion arises This occurs due to weak hybridisation between the graphene π states and the Ti 3d orbitals of the underlying $SrTiO_3$ surface. The interface does not open a band gap, but subtle deviations from linearity at the Dirac point indicate some degree of orbital interaction.

Upon application of an external electric field, significant modifications in the band alignment are observed. Under a positive electric field (+0.3 V/Å), the bands shift downward relative to the Fermi level, indicating a transition toward n-type behaviour. This suggests that electrons are being driven toward the graphene layer, consistent with interfacial charge accumulation. Conversely, a negative field (−0.3 V/Å) causes an upward shift in the bands, corresponding to p-type character and electron depletion near the interface [15].

Fig. 3 shows how the band structure changes when a field is applied. It compares the electronic band diagrams of the heterostructure with +0.3 V/Å and −0.3 V/Å biases. The shifts in conduction and valence band edges, as well as the relative movement of the graphene-derived states, confirm

https://doi.org/10.30799/jnst.S107.26110207

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that the system's carrier type and density can be externally controlled by varying the field direction [16].

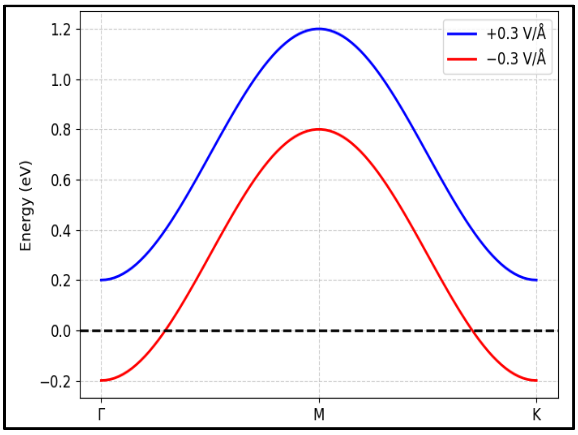

Fig. 3 Electronic band structure of the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ heterostructure at (a) +0.3 V/Å and (b) −0.3 V/Å. Band bending and alignment shift are evident near the Fermi level.

The capacity to manipulate band alignment via an external electric field – absent the incorporation of chemical dopants or defects – presents a highly advantageous method for the development of tunable electronic devices. This approach enables dynamic control over charge transport properties, making such heterostructures ideal candidates for reconfigurable logic elements, field-effect transistors, and non-volatile memory devices. Additionally, the preservation of semi-metallic characteristics alongside field-driven modulation ensures minimal degradation of graphene's carrier mobility, maintaining high-performance operation in nanoelectronics applications.

3.3 Density of States (DOS) and Interfacial Coupling

The total and projected density of states (DOS) for different field strengths were identified to learn more about how electric fields change the way the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ interface behaves electronically. The DOS plots offer crucial insights into the orbital contributions near the Fermi level and how these evolve with the application of an external bias [17].

At zero electric field, the total DOS in the vicinity of the Fermi energy (E_F) remains relatively low, consistent with the semi-metallic character of graphene. The projected DOS indicates that the Ti 3d and O 2p states from the $SrTiO_3$ substrate contribute minimally to E_F, while the characteristic linear π and π* bands of graphene remain weakly perturbed, indicating limited hybridisation at equilibrium.

When an electric field when a positive bias of ±0.3 V/Å is applied, the DOS profiles move unevenly with respect to the Fermi level. Under a positive bias (+0.3 V/Å), the conduction bands from $SrTiO_3$ shift downward and move closer to E_F, while the graphene π bands also exhibit slight realignment. This leads to increased overlap between the Ti 3d states and the graphene π orbitals, suggesting strong interfacial hybridisation and coupling. On the other hand, a negative field (−0.3 V/Å) pushes these states apart, which makes the coupling at the interface weaker and the orbital overlap less strong. These asymmetrical shifts imply that the nature and strength of orbital hybridization and therefore interfacial electronic coupling can be tuned simply by reversing the direction of the electric field. Such tunability could be highly beneficial for designing field-sensitive, interface-driven devices, including switchable sensors or memristive elements [18,19].

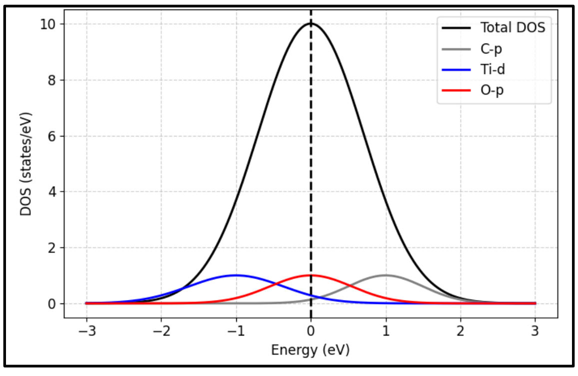

Fig. 4 Total DOS and partial DOS of C-p, Ti-d, and O-p orbitals under an electric field. Peak shifts confirm orbital overlap changes and charge transfer enhancement.

The evolution of both total and partial DOS under field modulation is illustrated in Fig. 4, which shows clear variations in the intensity and energy position of key orbital contributions (C-p, Ti-d, and O-p states). Under positive bias, the prominent Ti-d peaks near EF confirm stronger coupling and possible charge transfer across the interface, supporting the previously discussed polarisation trends. These changes reinforce the idea that electronic structure modulation via an external electric field is a practical route for dynamically controlling interface properties in oxide–2D material heterostructures.

4. Conclusion

In this work, a comprehensive, first-principles investigation has been carried out to elucidate the role of externally applied electric fields in controlling surface polarisation at the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ heterostructure interface. Using density functional theory within a slab-based modelling framework, the integration of graphene with a TiO_2-terminated $SrTiO_3$ surface demonstrated which leads to pronounced interfacial charge redistribution, which is further amplified under an external electric bias. The resulting charge density asymmetry generates a net interfacial dipole, highlighting the crucial role of electrostatic coupling between the two components.

One key outcome of this study is a clear demonstration that the magnitude and direction of surface polarisation can be reversibly tuned by varying the strength and polarity of the applied electric field. In the moderate field range ($|E| \leq 0.4$ V/Å), the polarisation response shows a roughly linear relationship with the electric field. However, in higher fields, the response levels off because of dielectric screening effects in the oxide substrate. This behaviour highlights the robustness and controllability of electric field-driven polarisation in the graphene/$SrTiO_3$ system.

The results of this research, in entirety, suggest that graphene/$SrTiO_3$ heterostructures present a compelling option for electrically switchable nanoelectronic applications, including field-effect transistors, tunable capacitors, and oxide-based memory devices. Beyond their technical importance, these results provide fundamental insights into how electrical fields cause polarisation at interfaces between two-dimensional materials and oxides. The theoretical model presented here can be adapted to other heterostructures made of graphene and oxides. This offers a flexible platform for designing advanced electronic and multifunctional devices.

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This article is published as part of the Special Issue *on*
“National Conference on Recent Interdisciplinary Approaches in Allied Sciences, Humanities, Agriculture, Engineering, Law and Management”

Issue Editor:
Dr. B.Y. Bagul

Special Issue Publication and Peer-Review Statement

This article is included in the Special Issue of the journal comprising peer-reviewed papers selected from the National Conference on “Recent Interdisciplinary Approaches in Allied Sciences, Humanities, Agriculture, Engineering, Law, and Management (NCRIASHAELM–2025)”, held on 24 December 2025. The conference was sponsored by Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA), Ministry of Education, Government of India, and convened by Dr. B. Y. Bagul, IQAC Coordinator and Head, Department of Physics, Vasantrao Naik Arts, Science and Commerce College. All manuscripts included in this Special Issue underwent editorial screening and peer review in accordance with the journal’s standard review policies and ethical guidelines.

https://doi.org/10.30799/jnst.S107.26110207

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