

Scheme 1 Lewis base binding and hydride and fluoride ion abstraction (see the ESI,[†] for detailed spectroscopic and experimental procedures of each reaction).

possible coordination of solvents at the Ge centre.¹⁰ The solid-state structure of $1^{iPr}PO$ (Fig. 2 and Table S4, ESI[†]) shows a spirocyclic geometry with the Ge atom being shared between the two rings. The two triflate ($CF_3SO_3 = OTf$) counter anions are non-coordinating in nature (closest Ge–O(OTf) contact being 4.3 Å).¹⁵ The average Ge–C bond length in $1^{iPr}PO$ (avg. 1.89 Å) is shorter than that observed in the case of 1^{iPr} (avg. 1.92 Å).¹⁰ The average Ge–O bond length of 1.80 Å lies in the longer range of Ge–O covalent bonds for tetracoordinated Ge(IV) compounds.¹⁶ Correspondingly, the average P–O bond lengths (1.57 Å) exhibit partial double bond character.

The optimized geometry of $1^{iPr}PO$ is in close agreement with the X-ray parameters (see ESI,[†] for the computational detail). The natural bond orbital (NBO) analyses of the optimized structure reveal donor–acceptor interactions between the lone pair orbitals on the oxygen atoms (from phosphine oxide) to the Ge-centred acceptor orbitals (Table S1, ESI[†]). The NBO frontier molecular orbitals depicted in Fig. 3A show that the acceptor orbitals are localized on the Ge centre, unlike our previously reported $1^{iPr}P$ where the acceptor orbitals comprised Ge–C and

Ge–P σ^* orbitals.¹⁰ The Wiberg bond order (WBO) calculated for Ge–C (0.79) confirms the single bond between them, while the WBO for Ge–O (0.46) echoes the presence of comparatively weaker bonding interaction between them. The low value of WBO for P–O (0.81) reflects less than double bond character. The electrostatic potential map as shown in Fig. 3B reflects the concentration of the positive charges on the Ge centre in $1^{iPr}PO$, as opposed to the dispersed di-positive charges over the P–Ge–P framework found in $1^{iPr}P$. Overall, compared to our earlier report on 1^{iPr} , our newly synthesized compound $1^{iPr}PO$ has di-cationic charges and orbital vacancies localized^{6,17} on the Ge-centre.

The effective Lewis acidity¹⁸ of $1^{iPr}PO$ following the Gutmann–Beckett (GB) method was investigated (see ESI,[†] for details). A $\Delta\delta^{31P}$ value of 25.4 ppm was obtained from the addition of 0.2 equivalents of Et₃PO to $1^{iPr}PO$ in CD_3CN (δ for free Et₃PO in CD_3CN is +49.7 ppm; for comparison $\Delta\delta^{31P}$ for $1^{iPr}P = 21.3$ ppm) (Fig. S7–S9, ESI[†]). The formation of the mono-adduct $1^{iPr}PO \cdot Et_3PO$ was confirmed from the ³¹P NMR study ($\delta^{iPr}PO$ at +75.57 ppm and δEt_3PO at +75.08 ppm) (Fig. S10–S12, ESI[†]). The mono-adduct $1^{iPr}PO \cdot Et_3PO$ remained in equilibrium with $1^{iPr}PO$, as revealed from the detailed NMR study (Fig. S12, ESI[†]).

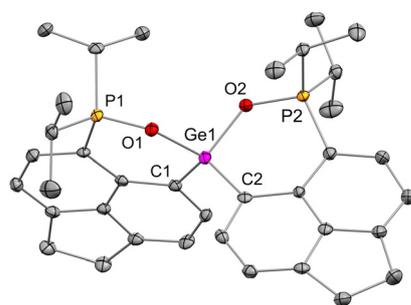


Fig. 2 Molecular structure of $1^{iPr}PO$ in the solid state (thermal ellipsoid 35%, H atoms, triflate counter anions and solvent molecules are omitted for clarity). Selected bond lengths [Å] Ge1–O1 = 1.803(2), Ge1–C1 = 1.895(3), P1–O1 = 1.575(2), Ge1–O2 = 1.797(3), Ge1–C2 = 1.891(3), P2–O2 = 1.570(2); selected bond angles [°] O1–Ge1–C1 = 103.9(1), O2–Ge1–C2 = 104.1(1), O1–Ge1–O2 = 105.1(1), C1–Ge1–C2 = 121.9(1).

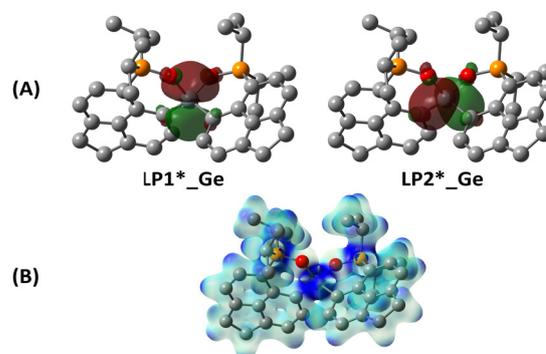


Fig. 3 (A) Natural bond orbitals localized on the Ge center; (B) electrostatic potential map with the range of 0.05 (red)–0.40 (blue).



We were not successful in obtaining single crystals of the adduct $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-Et}_3\text{PO}$. Rather, single crystals of the adduct formed with 4-*N,N'*-dimethylaminopyridine (DMAP) $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-DMAP}$ (Scheme 1) were obtained. The molecular structure determined showed the coordination of the Lewis base leading to a distorted trigonal bipyramidal geometry at the Ge centre (Fig. S17, ESI†).

We have prepared $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$ from the addition of one equivalent of KF/18-crown-6 to 1^{iPr}PO (Scheme 1). The $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR in CDCl_3 showed a doublet at +77 ppm ($^3J_{\text{P-F}} = 3.3$ Hz) and a corresponding peak at -125.2 ppm in the $^{19}\text{F}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR spectrum (see ESI,† for detail). The molecular structure of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$ (Fig. 4A and Table S6, ESI†) exhibits a distorted trigonal bipyramidal geometry, analogous to $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-DMAP}$. The Ge-F bond length is 1.746(2) Å, which is shorter compared to that found in the case of 1^{iPr}P-F (1.785(2) Å).¹⁰ The Ge-O bond lengths have increased (avg. Ge-O = 1.97 Å) compared to those in 1^{iPr}PO , with a corresponding decrease in the P-O bond lengths (avg. P-O = 1.53 Å). The calculated gas-phase fluoride ion affinity (FIA)¹⁹ at the Ge site of 1^{iPr}PO gave a very high value of 865 kJ mol⁻¹ (gas-phase FIA for reference SbF_5 is 497 kJ mol⁻¹) (Tables S2 and S3, see the ESI,† details). Incorporation of the acetonitrile (MeCN) solvated model decreased the calculated FIA value significantly to 142 kJ mol⁻¹ (solvent corrected FIA for reference SbF_5 is 315 kJ mol⁻¹), respectively. This phenomenon of solvent damping is more pronounced with the cationic Lewis acids compared to the neutral ones.^{20,21} Nonetheless, 1^{iPr}PO was found to be capable of abstracting a fluoride ion from AgSbF_6 under heating conditions forming $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$ (Scheme 1). 1^{iPr}PO also abstracted fluoride from TBABF₄ (TBA = *n*-tetrabutylammonium), which is a better fluoride ion donor, to give $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$ under room temperature conditions. Thus, 1^{iPr}PO proved to be Lewis superacidic^{22,23} under experimental conditions, despite low calculated values of FIA in solvated models.²⁴

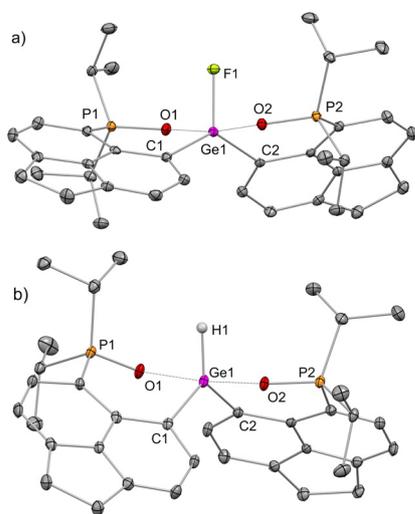
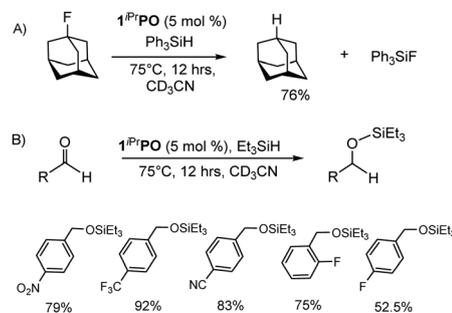


Fig. 4 Molecular structures of (A) $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$ and (B) $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ in the solid state (thermal ellipsoids 35%, H atoms, triflate counter anions and solvent molecules are omitted for clarity). Selected bond lengths [Å] (a) Ge1-F1 = 1.746(2), Ge1-O1 = 1.971(2), P1-O1 = 1.524(2), Ge1-O2 = 1.990(2), P2-O2 = 1.525(2); (b) Ge1-H1 = 1.436(2), Ge1-O1 = 2.013(2), P1-O1 = 1.520(2), Ge1-O2 = 2.056(2), P2-O2 = 1.517(2).

Gas-phase hydride ion affinity (HIA)¹⁹ calculation (Tables S2 and S3, see ESI† for detail) gave a very high value of 925 kJ mol⁻¹, while incorporation of the solvated model gave low calculated values of 185 kJ mol⁻¹ (MeCN). Notably, the gas phase HIA for reference $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ is 517 kJ mol⁻¹ and the solvent corrected HIA is 244 kJ mol⁻¹ for MeCN. Reaction of 1^{iPr}PO with NaBH_4 led to the formation of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ (Scheme 1). The $^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\}$ NMR spectrum of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ displayed a peak at +73.5 ppm. The molecular structure of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ closely resembles that of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$, possessing a Ge-H bond length of 1.436(2) Å (Fig. 4B and Table S7, ESI†). The inherently hydridophilic Ge center in 1^{iPr}PO activated the $\text{Et}_3\text{Si-H}$ bond under room temperature reaction conditions to give $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ (Scheme 1).^{25,26} However, 1^{iPr}PO does not abstract hydride from $\text{Ph}_3\text{Si-H}$ ²⁷ even upon heating.

Given the experimentally observed Lewis super acidic nature of 1^{iPr}PO , we have explored the catalytic hydrodefluorination²⁸ of an aliphatic C-F bond. With a catalyst loading of 5 mol% 1^{iPr}PO and employing Ph_3SiH as the hydride source, we have successfully achieved the hydrodefluorination of 1-adamantyl fluoride (76% conversion) in CD_3CN upon heating overnight at 75 °C (Scheme 2A) (see ESI,† for detail). The *in situ* catalytic reaction mixture showed NMR signals at $\delta^{31}\text{P}\{^1\text{H}\} = +77.8$ ppm and $\delta^{19}\text{F}\{^1\text{H}\} = -125.8$ ppm corresponding to the formation of $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-F}$, indicating the C-F bond activation over the Si-H bond activation (Fig. S40-S45, ESI†). Thus, we have proposed a catalytic pathway (Scheme S1, ESI†) involving the generation of the carbocation, which then abstracts hydride from Ph_3SiH to form the alkane along with the regeneration of the catalyst 1^{iPr}PO and Ph_3SiF . We do not observe any Ge-H bond formation as an intermediate, discarding the $\text{Ph}_3\text{Si-H}$ bond activation pathway by 1^{iPr}PO . This proposed mechanism is in line with that proposed by Müller *et al.* using the naphthalene-based digermyl hydronium borates as a catalyst.⁷ On the other hand, using Et_3SiH as the hydride source for the same catalytic hydrodefluorination reaction (Scheme 2A) turned out to be less promising owing to the competing Si-H bond activation along with C-F bond activation by 1^{iPr}PO . Only 40% conversion to the corresponding alkane was possible, the catalyst being transformed into $1^{\text{iPr}}\text{PO-H}$ after 12 hours (Fig. S48-S51, ESI†). Notably, catalytic hydrodefluorination was unachievable using 1^{iPr}P as the catalyst. As a matter of fact, there are very few



Scheme 2 Catalytic applications of 1^{iPr}PO : (A) hydrodefluorination of 1-adamantyl fluoride and (B) hydrosilylation of electron-deficient aromatic aldehydes.



reports on catalytic hydrodefluorination reactions achieved using molecular germanium as a catalyst.^{3,7,8,17} Our catalyst was ineffective for other C–F bonds. This lack of reactivity may be attributed to the stabilization of the Ge(IV) by the intramolecular P=O donors, thereby compromising the Lewis acidity at the Ge(IV) site.

The hydridophilicity of **1^{IPr}PO** prompted us to explore the substrate scope for the catalytic hydrosilylation reactions (Scheme 2B) of aromatic aldehydes (see ESI,† for detail). In our earlier report, we have shown the catalytic hydrosilylation of *p*-methyl benzaldehyde using **1^{IPr}P** as a catalyst. However, catalytic hydrosilylation of electron-deficient aromatic aldehydes was not possible using **1^{IPr}P**. In this study, we were successful in converting a variety of electron-deficient aldehydes into the corresponding silyl ethers using 5 mol% of **1^{IPr}PO** under mild heating conditions (Scheme 2B).²⁹

It was observed from the NMR study that the aldehydes did not bind to the Ge-centre of the catalyst. The NMR investigations of the catalytic reaction mixture showed the formation of a Ge–H bond ($\delta^{31}\text{P}\{\text{H}\} = +73.5$ ppm) from Et₃Si–H bond activation, corresponding to the formation of **1^{IPr}PO–H** as an intermediate (Fig. S53, see ESI,† for the NMRs). Therefore, the reaction is likely to proceed by Et₃SiH bond activation by **1^{IPr}PO** followed by Si–H addition across the C=O bond in the carbonyls (Scheme S2, see ESI†). A similar mechanism was observed in the case of **1^{IPr}P** as a catalyst. The ²⁹Si{¹H} NMR spectrum showed the formation of the hydrosilylated products (Fig. S59, ESI†). The formation of Et₃SiOTf as a competent catalyst, though not detected in the NMR spectrum, cannot be completely overruled. The irreversible transformation of the catalyst to **1^{IPr}PO–H** was observed from *in situ* NMR study of the catalytic reaction mixture, which might be responsible for poor catalytic outcome in certain substrates (see ESI,† for detail).

In conclusion, we have successfully manipulated the frontier orbitals by treating **1^{IPr}P** with an oxidant to form the phosphine-oxide stabilized Ge(IV) di-cation **1^{IPr}PO**. Localization of the positive charges and acceptor orbitals on the Ge-centre has significantly enhanced the Lewis acidity. The well-exposed cationic Ge(IV) site is now capable of abstracting fluoride ions from a hexafluoroantimonate anion, thereby marking its Lewis super acidic nature. The hard and soft Lewis acidic nature of **1^{IPr}PO** have been manifested in catalytic hydrodefluorination of 1-adamantyl fluoride and hydrosilylation of electron-deficient aromatic aldehydes, which were unachievable with our previously reported **1^{IPr}P**. Thus, the localization of the cationic charges on the Ge-centre has led to the expansion of the catalytic portfolio. Our group is engaged in investigating further catalytic applications of **1^{IPr}PO**, and extending this catalyst design strategy to other main-group Lewis acids.

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Data availability

Experimental details, spectroscopic data, X-ray diffraction analysis data, and computational data are available in the ESI.†

Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict to declare.

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