

# Smart Sensors for the IoT

## 5. Signal Conditioners

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The logo of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL), consisting of the letters 'EPFL' in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

# Outline

- **Signal conditioners for resistive sensors**
- Signal conditioners for capacitive sensors (capacitive sensor interfaces)



# Examples of Resistive Sensors – Thermistors

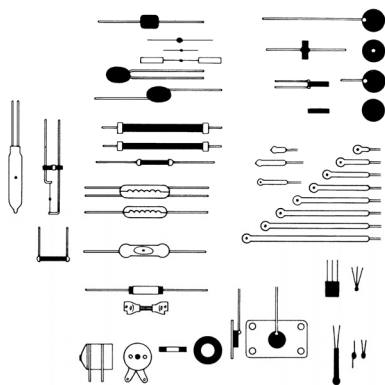
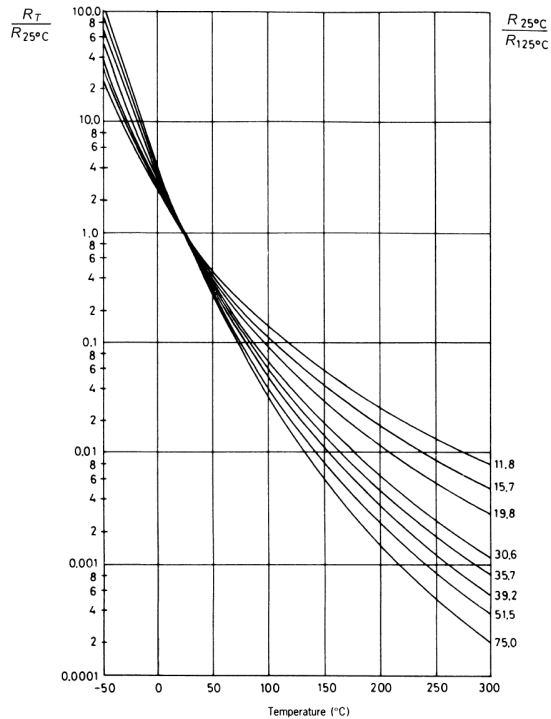


Figure 2.19 Different shapes for NTC thermistors (from Fenwal Electronics).

- Nonlinear characteristic given by
 
$$R_T = R_0 \cdot e^{B \cdot (1/T - 1/T_0)}$$
- where  $R_0$  is the resistance at 25°C (or other reference temperature) and  $T_0$  is this temperature in kelvins
- $B$  is called the **characteristic temperature** of the material value, which is temperature-dependent (it increases with temperature) and usually ranges from 2000 K to 4000 K

TABLE 2.4 General Characteristics of Frequently Used NTC Thermistors

Parameter	
Temperature range	−100 °C to 450 °C (not in a single unit)
Resistance at 25 °C	0.5 Ω to 100 MΩ (1 kΩ to 10 MΩ is common)
Characteristic temperature, $B$	2000 K to 5500 K
Maximal temperature	>125 °C (300 °C in steady state; 600 °C intermittently)
Dissipation constant ( $\delta$ )	1 mW/K in still air 8 mW/K in oil
Thermal time constant	1 ms to 22 s
Maximal power dissipation	1 mW to 1 W

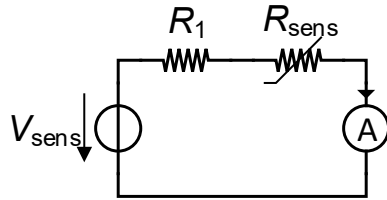
# Resistance Measurement Methods

- Resistance measurement can be classified in two different methods
  - ▶ **Deflection** methods and
  - ▶ **Null** methods
- Deflection methods sense the drop in **voltage** across the resistance to be measured or the **current** through it or both
- Null methods are based on measurement **bridges**

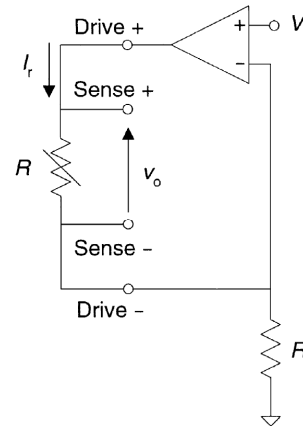
# Resistance Measurement

## Current sensing

(imposing constant voltage)

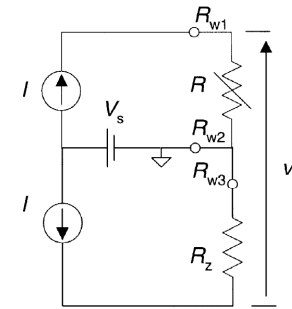


$$R = R_0 \cdot (1 + x)$$



## Voltage sensing

(imposing constant current)



- The output voltage for a linear sensor is

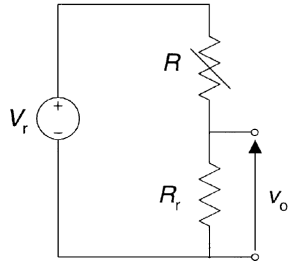
$$v_0 = I_r \cdot R = \frac{V_r}{R_r} \cdot R_0 \cdot (1 + x)$$

- which consists of small fluctuations (due to  $x$ ) superimposed on a very large offset voltage corresponding to  $x = 0$ . The latter can be canceled with the circuit shown on the right

$$v_0 = I \cdot (R - R_z) = I \cdot R_0 \cdot x$$

- which is linear assuming  $R_z = R_0$ . It additionally delivers a differential voltage
- Using a four-wire sensor, wire resistances does not contribute to the output voltage

# Voltage Dividers



$$v_0 = \frac{R_r}{R_r + R} \cdot V_r$$

- Input resistance of voltmeter much higher than  $R$  we have

$$v_0 = \frac{R_r}{R_r + R} \cdot V_r$$

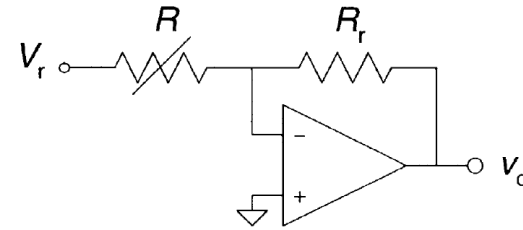
- from which we can calculate

$$R = R_r \cdot (V_r - v_0) / v_0$$

- or

$$R = R_r \cdot v_0 / (V_r - v_0)$$

- if  $R$  and  $R_r$  are swapped
- Well suited to sensors with large resistance variation and also nonlinear sensors such as NTC thermistors because the nonlinearity of the relationship between  $v_0$  and  $R$  permits thermistor linearization

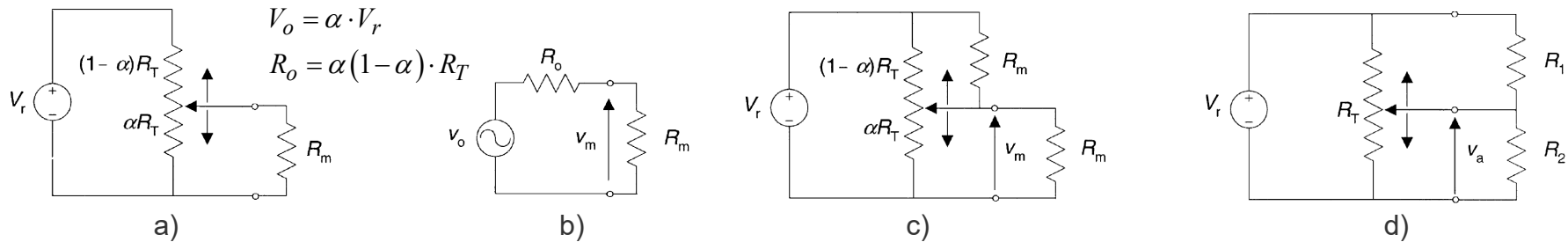


- The voltage-resistance relation in voltage dividers is **not linear** because the current in the circuit depends on the unknown resistance
- If that current were constant, the drop in voltage across a linear resistive sensor would be a linear function of the measurand
- For sensors whose resistance decreases with the applied input, the circuit on the right injects a constant current into the sensor and yields an output voltage

$$v_0 = -\frac{R_r}{R} \cdot V_r$$

- which increases with the measurand (i.e.  $R$  decreasing)

# Potentiometers



- Assuming the input resistance of the voltmeter is given by  $R_m$ , the measured voltage is

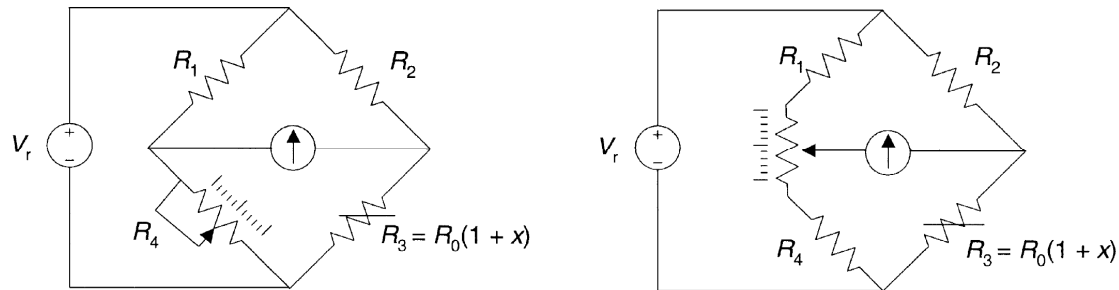
$$v_m = \frac{R_m}{R_o + R_m} \cdot v_o = \frac{\alpha}{1 + \frac{\alpha(1-\alpha)}{k}} \cdot V_r \cong \alpha \cdot V_r \text{ for } k \triangleq \frac{R_m}{R_T} \gg 1$$

- which is linear only if  $k \gg 1$  or  $R_m \gg R_T$
- A simple way to reduce the loading error without increasing  $R_m$  is to place a resistor equal to  $R_m$  on the top side of the potentiometer (c). The measured voltage is

$$v_m = \frac{\alpha(k + 1 - \alpha)}{2\alpha(1 - \alpha) + k} \cdot V_r$$

- The added resistor forces  $v_m/V_r = 2$  at the central position  $\alpha = 0.5$  thus achieving zero error at that point
- By using two different resistors (d) we can obtain zero error at any desired point

# The Wheatstone Bridge

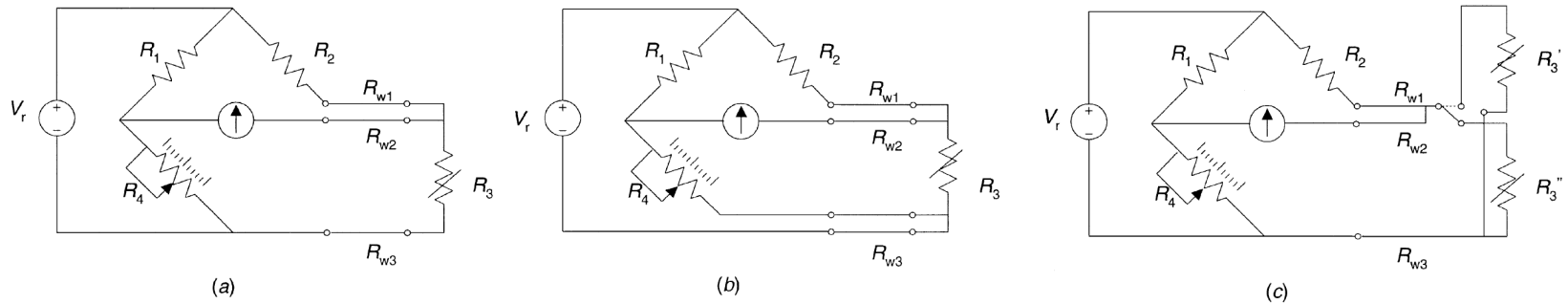


- Principle is to adjust the value of a standard resistor  $R_4$  in order to achieve a balanced condition by means of a feedback system (electric or manual) until the current through the galvanometer or other null indicator is zero resulting in

$$R_3 = R_4 \cdot \frac{R_2}{R_1}$$

- The changes in  $R_3$  is then proportional to the corresponding changes imposed on  $R_4$  in order to balance the bridge
- The right figure shows an arrangement for eliminating the influence that the contact resistance in the adjustable arm has on the measurement by including that resistance in series with the central arm (bridge), through which there is no current when reaching the balance

# Wheatstone Bridge with Long Leads

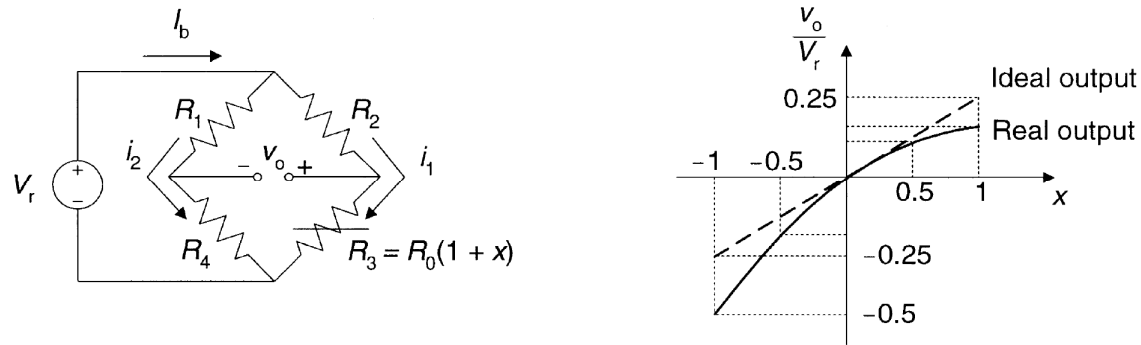


- The resistance and temperature dependence of long wires can result in important errors. The three-wire method (a) solves this problem. Wires 1 and 3 must be equal and undergo the same temperature changes
- The characteristics of wire 2 are irrelevant because in the balance condition there is no current through the bridge central arm
- The relative error in the measurement of  $R_3$  is

$$\varepsilon = \frac{R_4 R_2 / R_1 - R_3}{R_3} = \frac{R_w}{R_3} \cdot \left(1 - \frac{R_4}{R_1}\right) \text{ where } R_w = R_{w1} = R_{w3}$$

- Figure b shows an alternative circuit with the same objective having a similar error which decreases for  $R_3 \gg R_w$
- Figure c shows how to apply this method to several sensors using a single set of three long wires

# Deflection Measurement of Wheatstone Bridge

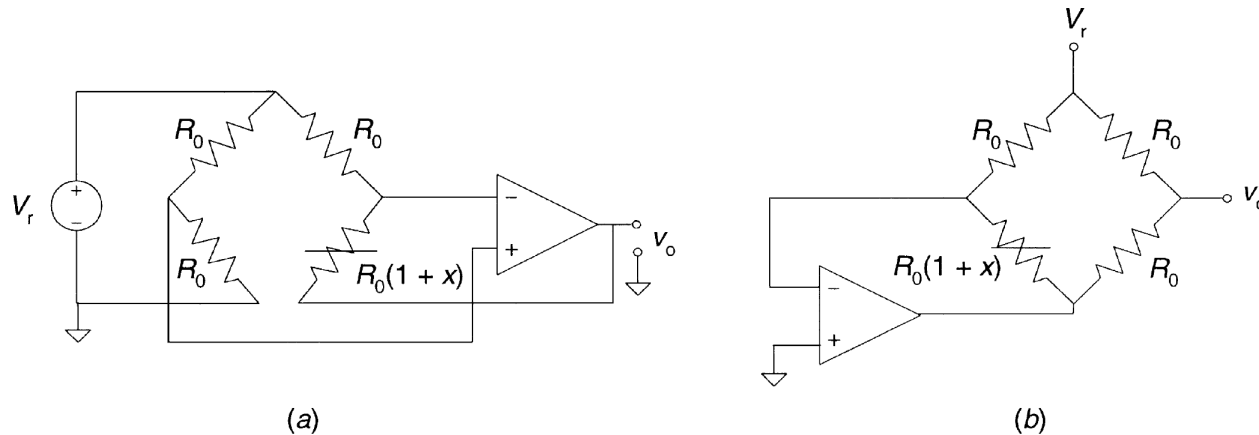


- Instead of measuring the action needed to restore balance on the bridge, the deflection method measures the voltage difference between both voltage dividers or the current through a detector bridging them
- The voltage difference between both branches is

$$v_o = \left( \frac{R_3}{R_2 + R_3} - \frac{R_4}{R_1 + R_4} \right) \cdot V_r = \frac{k \cdot x}{(k+1)(k+1+x)} \cong \frac{k \cdot x}{(k+1)^2} \text{ for } x \ll k + 1$$

- where  $k = R_1/R_4 = R_2/R_0$  corresponding to the situation when the bridge is balanced ( $x = 0$ )

# Analog Linearization of Resistive Sensor Bridges



- The Wheatstone bridge can be modified to maintain the current constant through it
- For an ideal op amp, the output is given by

$$v_0 = -x \cdot \frac{V_r}{2}$$

- This method, however, requires the bridge to have five terminals accessible. The bridge must be opened at one of the junctions where the sensor is connected
- The pseudo-bridge in Figure b overcomes that limitation. The opamp must have low offset voltage, input currents, and drifts
- If  $x$  can be negative, the op amp must operate on a dual (split) power supply

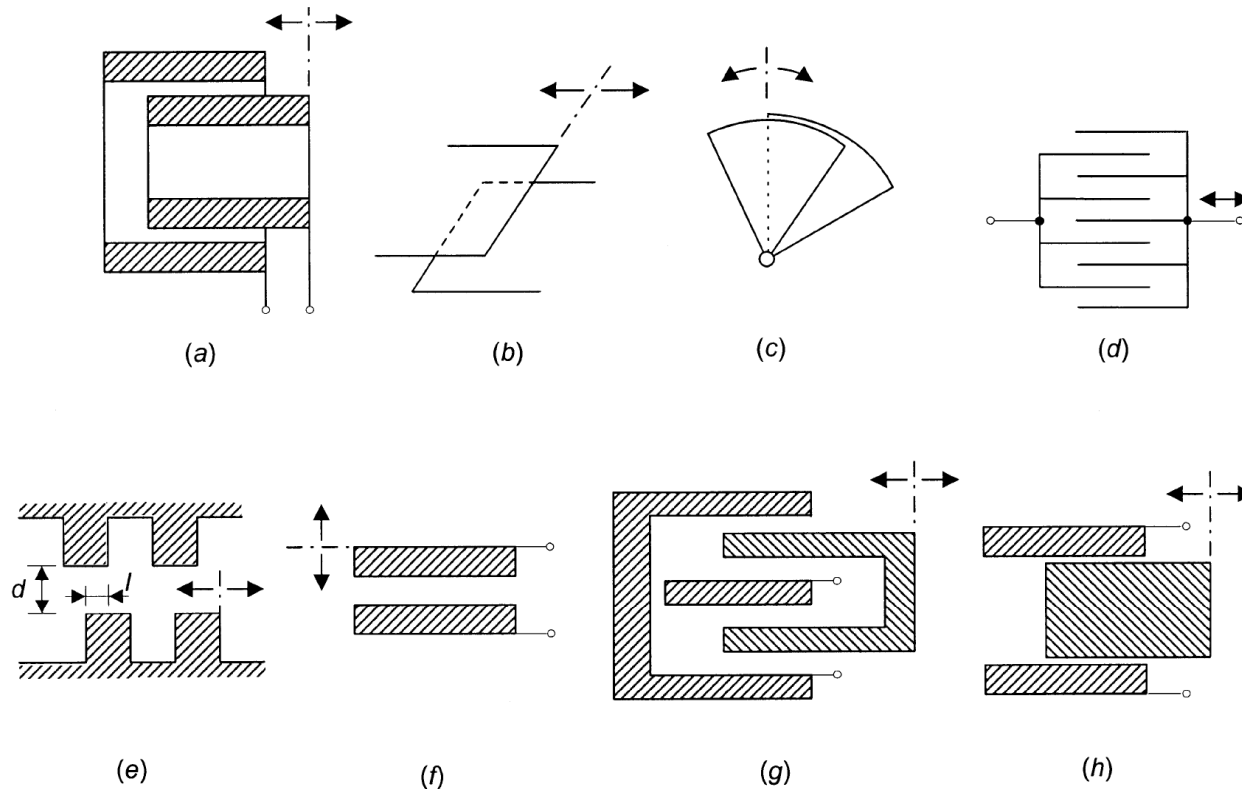
# Outline

- Signal conditioners for resistive sensors
- **Signal conditioners for capacitive sensors**

# Introduction

- Capacitive sensors cover a wide range of applications
- They are well suited for high integration
- They consume little power
- However they are prone to parasitics

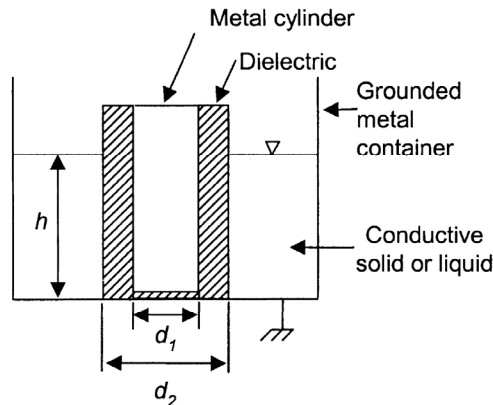
# Basic Capacitive Sensors



**Figure 4.3** Different arrangements for capacitive sensors based on (a–e) a variation of area, (f) plate separation, and (g, h) dielectric.

# Capacitive Level Gages

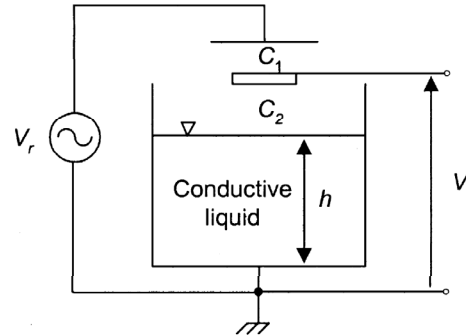
## Conductive liquid



(a)

- Capacitance change through area variation
- Linear with height  $h$

$$C = \frac{2\pi \cdot \epsilon \cdot h}{\ln\left(\frac{d_2}{d_1}\right)}$$



(b)

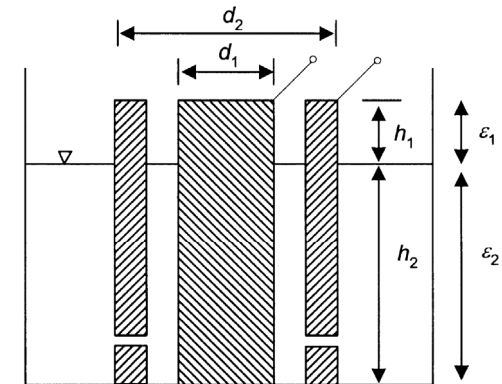
- Capacitance change due to distance variation
- Highly conductive liquid (mercury, water, etc.)

$$v_o = \frac{C_1}{C_1 + C_2} \cdot v_r$$

$$C_1 = \text{const.}$$

$$C_2 \propto 1/h$$

## Nonconductive liquid

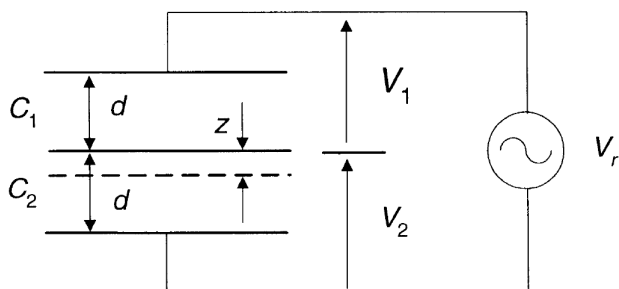


(c)

- Capacitance change due to dielectric variation
- Conductive cylinders are coaxial

$$C \cong \frac{2\pi(\epsilon_1 h_1 + \epsilon_2 h_2)}{\ln\left(\frac{d_2}{d_1}\right)}$$

# Differential Capacitors

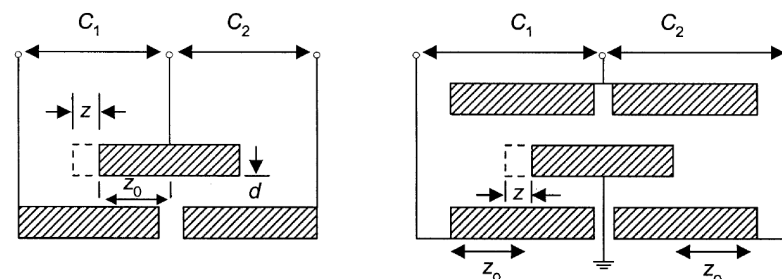


$$C_1 = \frac{\varepsilon A}{d+z} \quad V_1 = \frac{C_2}{C_1+C_2} \cdot V_r = \frac{d+z}{2d} \cdot V_r$$

$$C_2 = \frac{\varepsilon A}{d-z} \quad V_2 = \frac{C_1}{C_1+C_2} \cdot V_r = \frac{d-z}{2d} \cdot V_r$$

- The differential voltage  $V_1 - V_2$  is **linear** with displacement  $z$

$$V_1 - V_2 = \frac{z}{2d} \cdot V_r$$



$$C_1 = \varepsilon \frac{w(z_0 - z)}{d} = \varepsilon \frac{w}{d} z_0 \frac{z_0 - z}{z_0} = C_0 \frac{z_0 - z}{z_0}$$

$$C_2 = \varepsilon \frac{w(z_0 + z)}{d} = \varepsilon \frac{w}{d} z_0 \frac{z_0 + z}{z_0} = C_0 \frac{z_0 + z}{z_0}$$

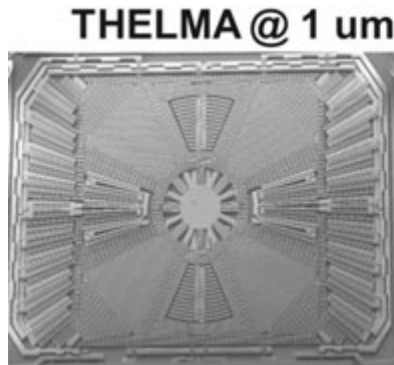
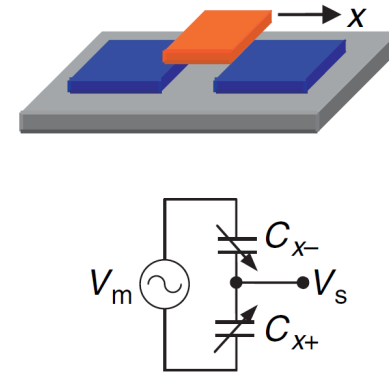
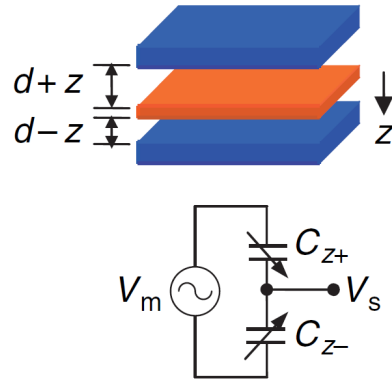
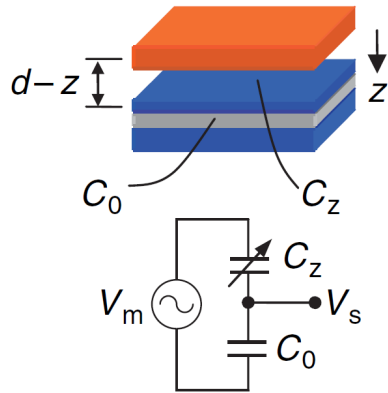
$$V_1 = \frac{C_2}{C_1+C_2} \cdot V_r = \frac{z_0 + z}{2z_0} \cdot V_r$$

$$V_2 = \frac{C_1}{C_1+C_2} \cdot V_r = \frac{z_0 - z}{2z_0} \cdot V_r$$

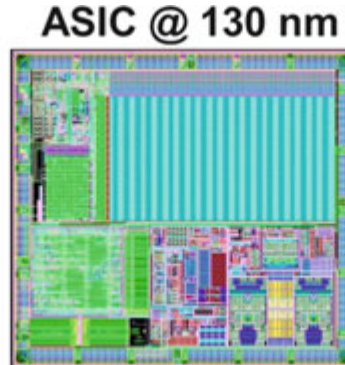
- The differential voltage  $V_1 - V_2$  is again **linear** with displacement  $z$

$$V_1 - V_2 = \frac{z}{z_0} \cdot V_r$$

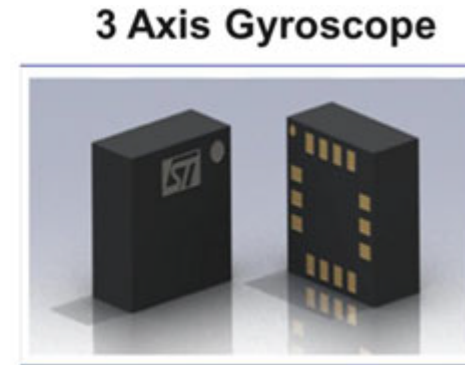
# Accelerometers



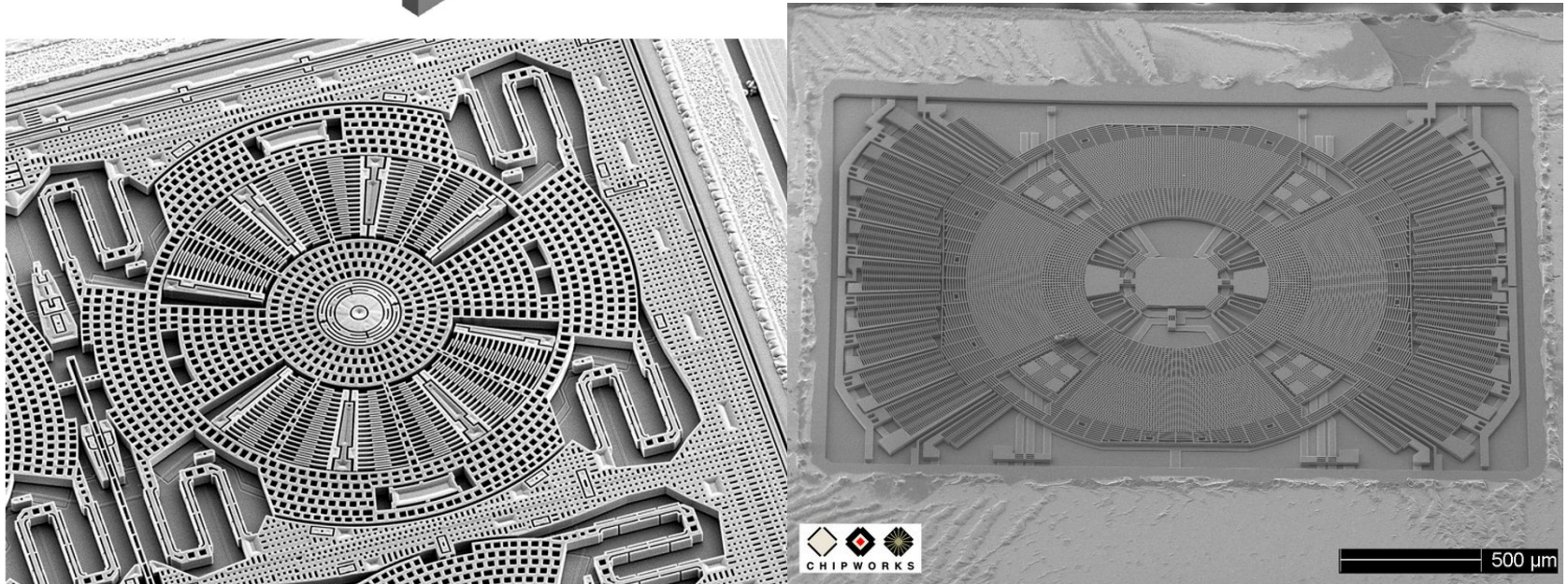
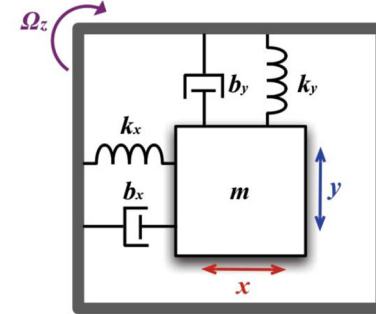
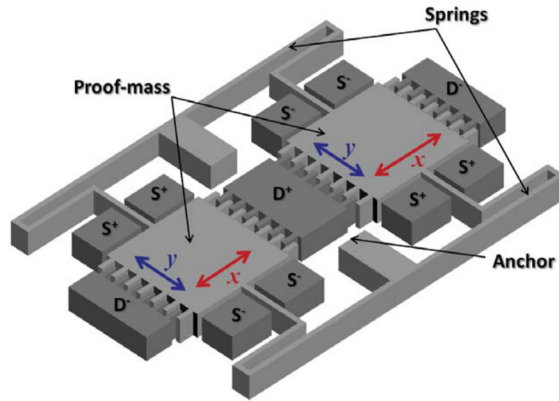
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# Gyroscopes

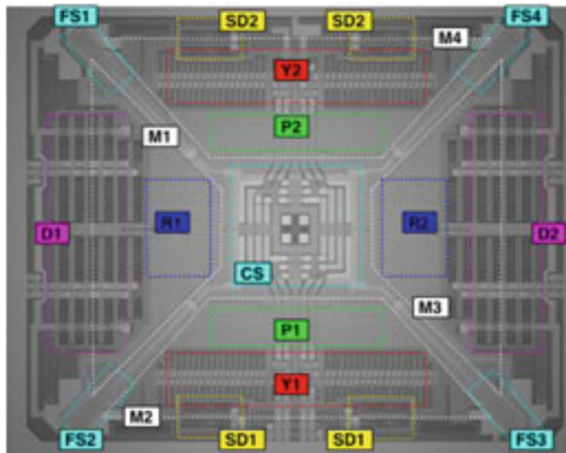
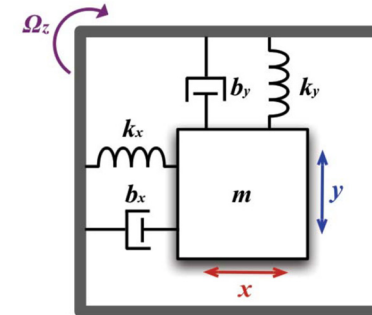
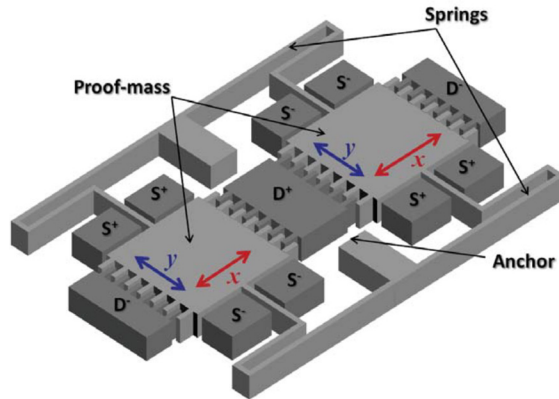


Analog Devices ADXRS295 Gyroscope

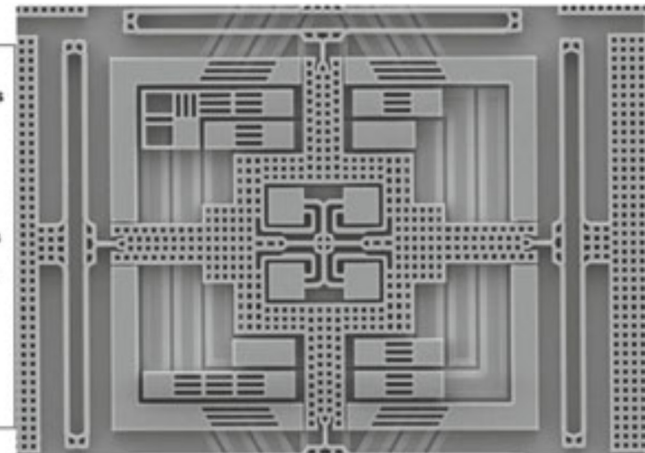
ST LYPR540AH Tri-axis MEMS gyroscope

D. E. Serrano, "Design and Analysis of MEMS Gyroscopes, IEEE Sensors, 2013.

# Tri-axial Coriolis Gyroscope



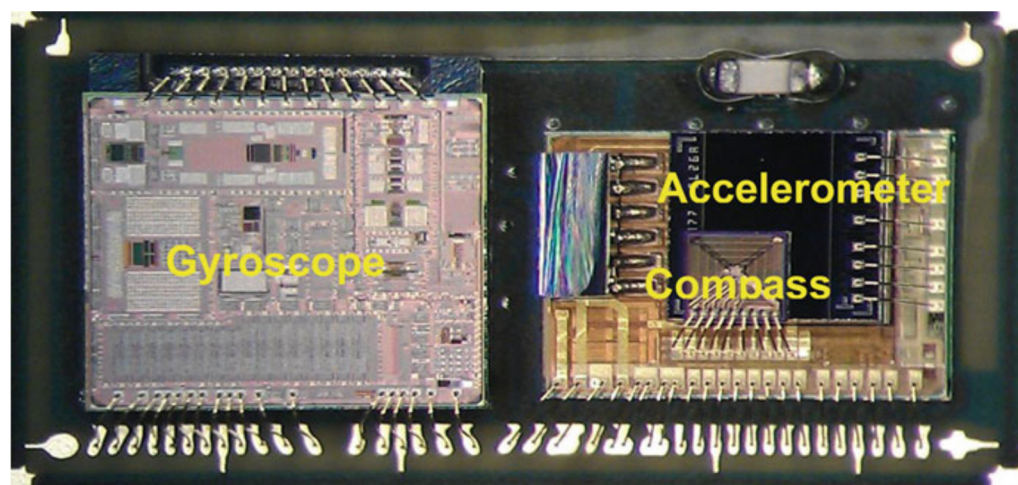
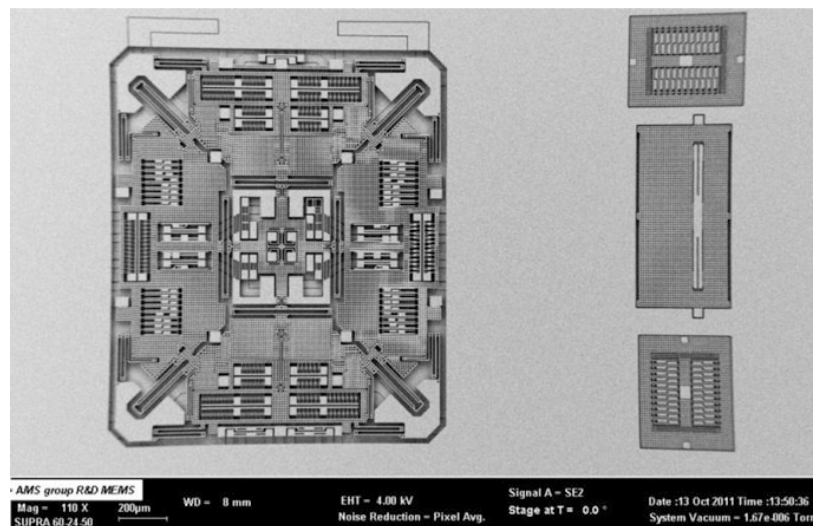
- M1, M3: Roll sensing masses
- M2, M4: Pitch & Yaw sensing masses
- D1-2: Drive-forcing comb fingers
- SD1-2: Drive-readout comb fingers
- P1-2: Pitch-mode sensing electrodes
- R1-2: Roll-mode sensing electrodes
- Y1-2: Yaw-mode parallel plates
- FS1-4: coupling folded springs
- CS: central coupling springs



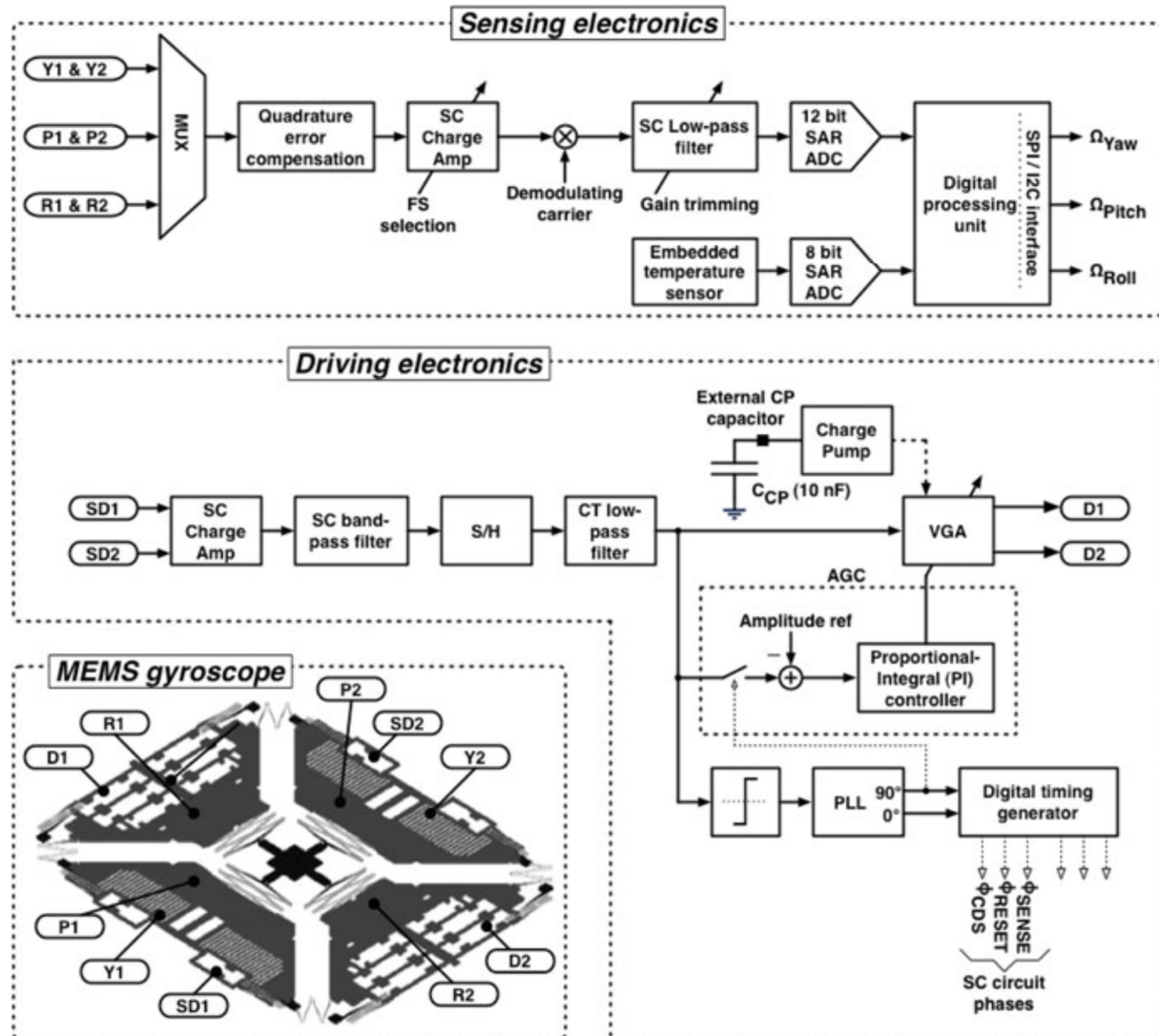
D. E. Serrano, "Design and Analysis of MEMS Gyroscopes, IEEE Sensors, 2013.

B. Vigna, E. Lasalandra, and T. Ungaretti, Motion MEMS and Sensors, Today and Tomorrow, in Advances in Analog Circuit Design, Springer, 2012.

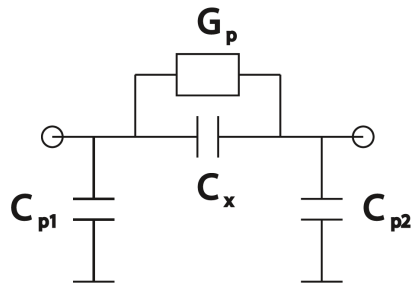
# Six and Nine Degree of Freedom Motion Sensors



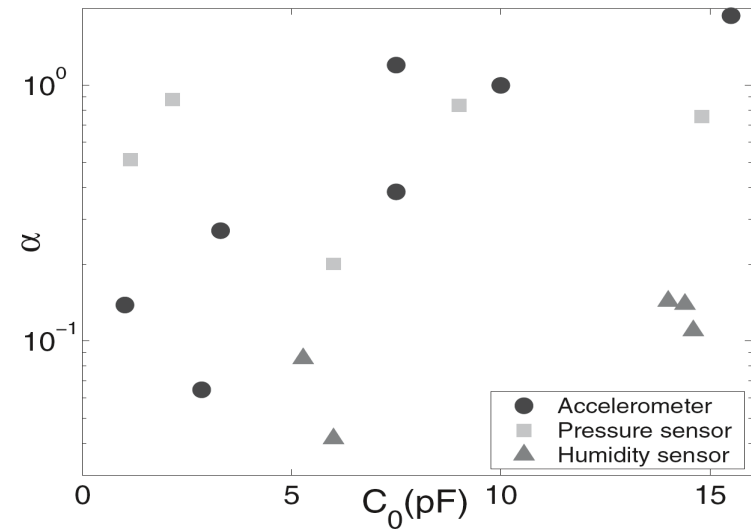
# System Architecture Block Diagram



# Mean Capacitance and Capacitance Variation



Single capacitive sensor model with sense capacitance  $C_x$ , parasitic shunt conductance  $G_p$  and parasitic capacitances  $C_{p1}$  and  $C_{p2}$

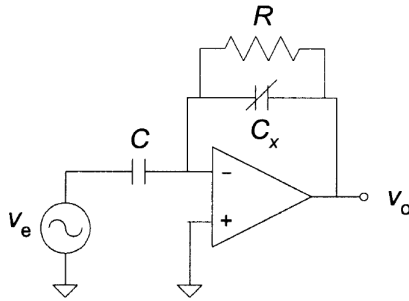


- The mean capacitance  $C_0$  and the relative full-scale deviation  $\alpha$  are defined as

$$C_0 = \frac{C_{x,min} + C_{x,max}}{2} \quad \text{and} \quad \alpha \triangleq \frac{\Delta C}{C_0}$$

- Various capacitive transducer applications show a wide range of mean capacitance  $C_0$  and relative full scale deviations  $\alpha$  which are represented above
- Values of  $\alpha$  and  $C_0$  depend on the excitation (acceleration, pressure, humidity), the physical input range of the application, the sensor structure and the technology

# Capacitance-to-Voltage Converters

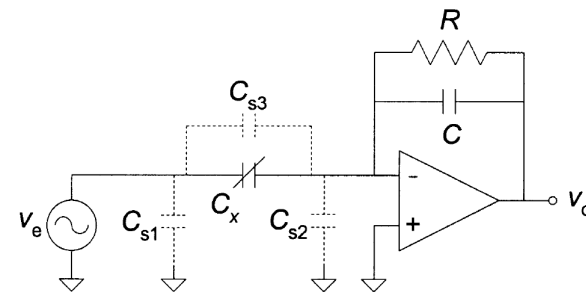


- The capacitance change with the distance between the two plates according to

$$C_x = \epsilon \frac{A}{d(1+x)} = \frac{C_0}{1+x}$$

- where  $C_0 = \epsilon A/d$
- If the op amp is assumed ideal and  $R$  is disregarded, the output voltage is

$$v_o = -\frac{Z_x}{Z} \cdot v_e = -\frac{C}{C_0} (1+x)v_e$$

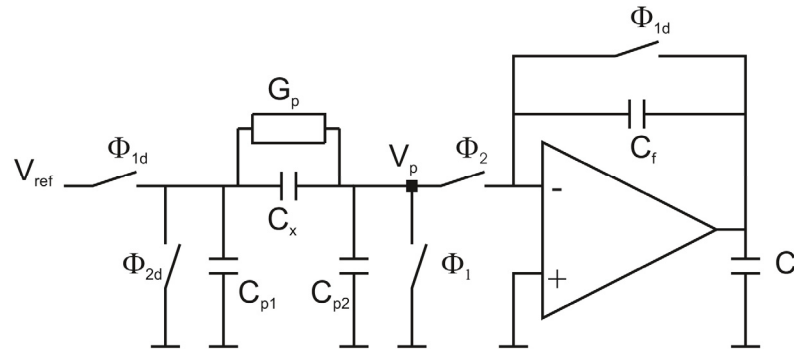


- Applies a voltage to the sensor and measures the resulting current by converting it to a voltage through  $C$
- Disregarding  $R$  (op amp bias) and stray capacitance  $C_{s3}$ , the output voltage is

$$v_o = -\frac{C_x}{C} \cdot v_e$$

- which is proportional to the sensor capacitance  $C_x$
- Note that stray capacitances  $C_{s1}$  and  $C_{s2}$  do not contribute to the output

# Capacitance-to-Voltage Converters



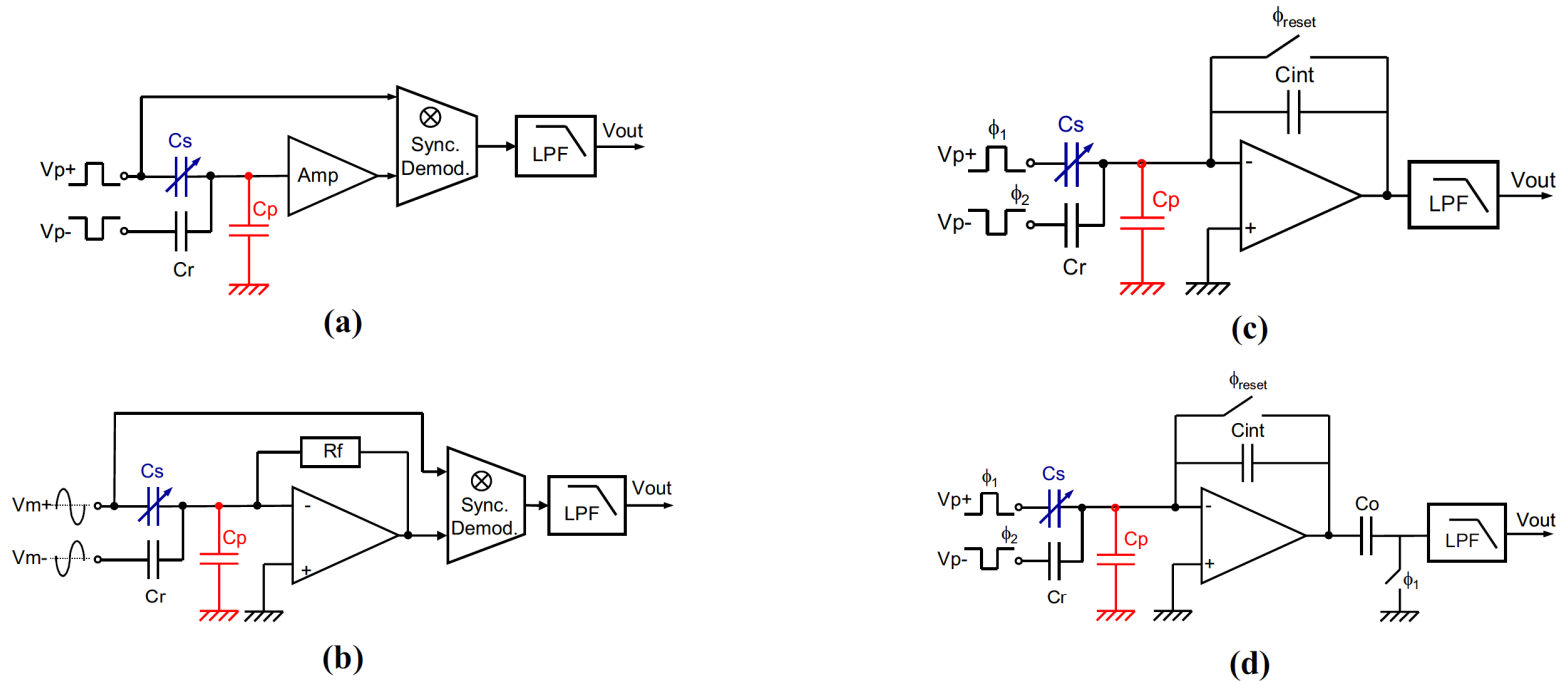
$$V_{out} = \frac{C_x}{C_f} \cdot V_{ref}$$

- The conventional non-inverting SC amplifier can work as a capacitance-to-voltage converter and is known to be **insensitive** to parasitic capacitors  $C_{p1}$  and  $C_{p2}$
- During phase  $\Phi_1$ , the sense capacitor  $C_x$  is charged to  $V_{ref}$ , while during phase  $\Phi_2$ , this charge is transferred to the feedback capacitor  $C_f$  leading to an output voltage

$$V_{out} = \frac{C_x}{C_f} \cdot V_{ref}$$

- In reality the charge transfer is affected by the leakage through the conductance  $G_p$ , the OTA finite transient response, offset and finite gain

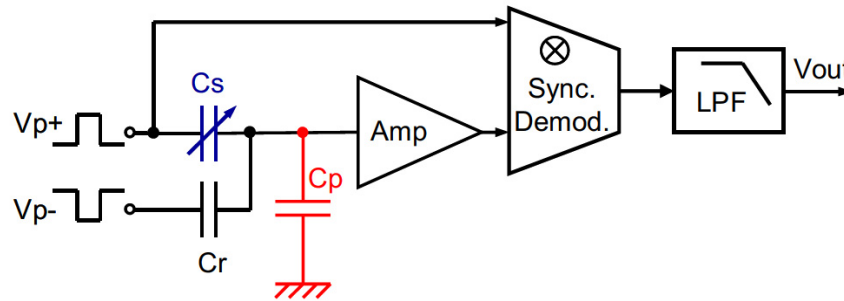
# Main Capacitive Readout Circuits



**Figure 1:** Simplified block diagram of various capacitive readout circuits: **(a)** ac-bridge with voltage amplifier; **(b)** Transimpedance amplifier; **(c)** Switch-capacitor circuit; **(d)** Switched-capacitor circuit with  $kT/C$  noise reduction.

- Capacitive readout circuits can be divided into three groups:
  - ▶ ac-bridge with voltage amplifier,
  - ▶ transimpedance amplifier,
  - ▶ switched-capacitor circuits

# Square Wave Driven AC-bridge with Voltage Amplifier

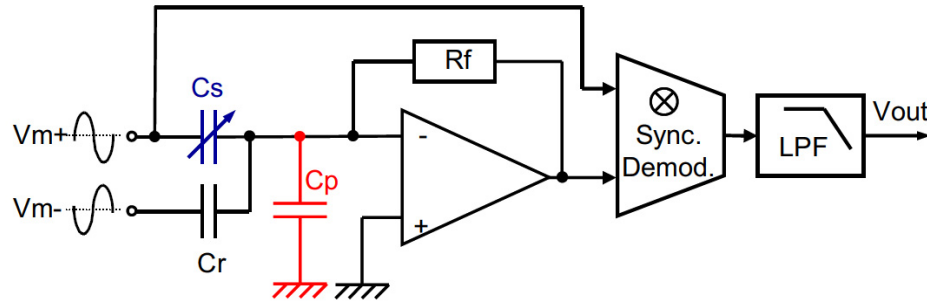


- The sense and reference capacitors  $C_S$  and  $C_r$  are driven by square waves of opposite signs
- The amplitude of the half bridge output which is proportional to  $\Delta C = C_S - C_r$  is then amplified by a voltage amplifier and demodulated resulting in

$$V_{out} = \frac{\Delta C}{2C_0 + C_p} \cdot A_v \cdot V_{ref} \text{ where } C_0 = \frac{C_S + C_r}{2}$$

- This architecture does not eliminate the effect of the parasitic capacitance  $C_p$  which can significantly degrade the performance

# Harmonic AC-bridge with Transimpedance Amplifier

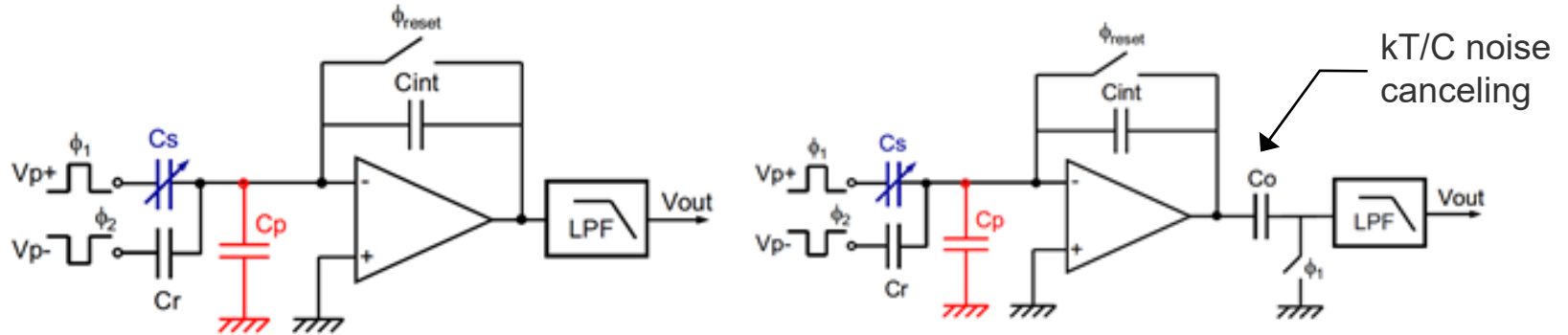


- The bridge output is held at virtual ground by an op-amp with resistive feedback (transimpedance amplifier), which reduces the effect of  $C_p$
- The drive signals are sinusoidal, with frequency  $f_{drive}$ , to avoid errors induced by distortion
- If  $f_{drive}$  is smaller than the amplifier bandwidth, the output voltage after demodulation equals

$$V_{out} = 2\pi f_{drive} \cdot V_m \cdot R_f \cdot \Delta C$$

- Requires harmonic oscillator

# Switched Capacitor Interface

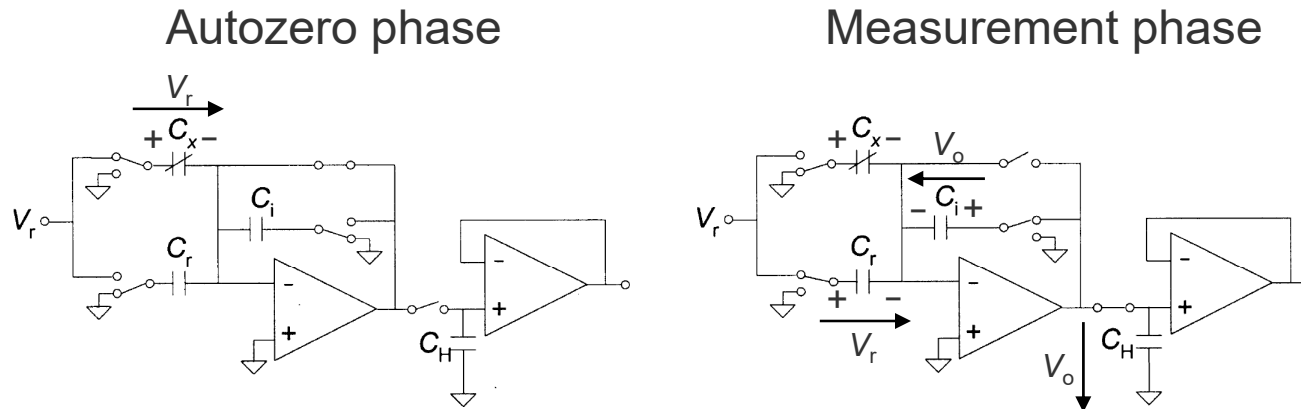


- Capacitor  $C_s$  is connect to  $V_{p+}$  during phase  $\Phi_1$  while the integration capacitor  $C_{int}$  and the parasitic capacitor  $C_p$  are discharged
- Capacitor  $C_s$  is then connect to ground while  $C_r$  is connected to  $V_{p-}$
- The charge difference  $\Delta C \cdot V_{ref}$  is integrated in the feedback capacitor leading to

$$V_{out} = \frac{\Delta C}{C_{int}} \cdot V_p \text{ with } \Delta C = C_s - C_r$$

- This circuit also eliminates the effect of the parasitic capacitances and does not need complex driving voltages
- The offset and  $1/f$  noise is cancelled by autozero
- The  $kT/C_{int}$  thermal noise can be eliminated by sampling and deducting from the output

# Switched Capacitor Charge Redistribution Method



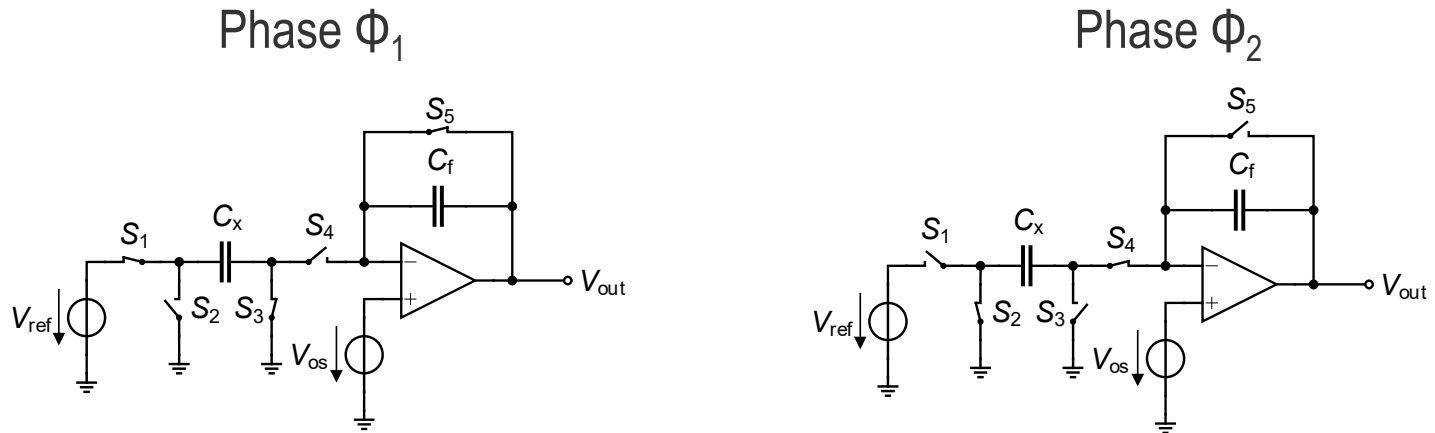
- In the autozero phase the sensor  $C_x$  is charged at  $V_r$  while the other capacitors  $C_r$  and  $C_i$  are discharged
- In the measurement phase,  $C_x$  is discharged,  $C_r$  is connected to  $V_r$
- Applying the charge conservation at the virtual ground between the autozero and measurement phases leads to

$$-C_x \cdot V_r + 0 + 0 = 0 - C_r \cdot V_r - C_i \cdot V_o$$

- Resulting in the output voltage proportional to the difference between  $C_x$  and  $C_r$

$$V_o = \frac{C_x - C_r}{C_i} \cdot V_r$$

# Effect of the Amplifier Offset Voltage



- The amplifier offset voltage introduces an offset voltage at the output

$$V_{out} = \frac{C_x}{C_f} \cdot V_{ref} + \left(1 + \frac{C_x}{C_f}\right) \cdot V_{os}$$

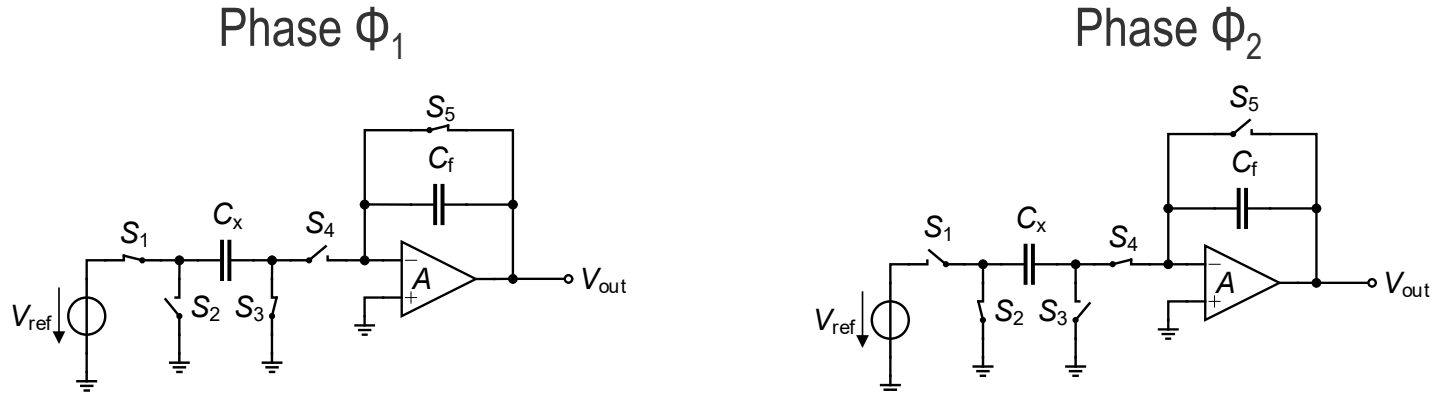
- And results in a smaller value estimation of the capacitance  $C_x$

$$\widetilde{C}_x = C_x + (C_x + C_f) \cdot \frac{V_{os}}{V_{ref}}$$

- Or a relative error

$$\varepsilon \triangleq \frac{\widetilde{C}_x - C_x}{C_x} = \left(1 + \frac{C_x}{C_f}\right) \cdot \frac{V_{os}}{V_{ref}}$$

# Effect of the Amplifier Finite Gain



- The amplifier finite gain  $A$  introduces a reduction of the gain

$$V_{out} = \frac{C_x/C_f}{1 + \frac{C_x/C_f}{A}} \cdot V_{ref}$$

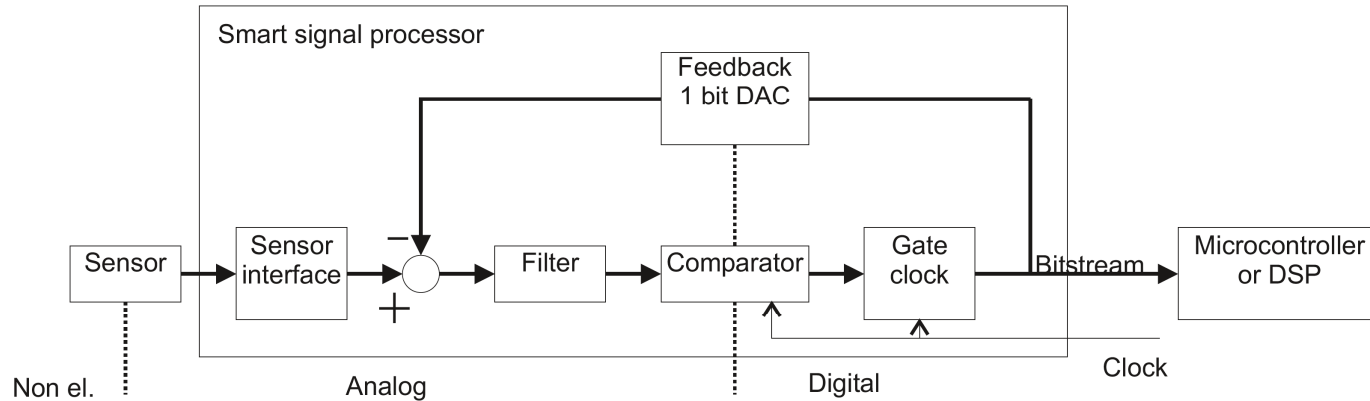
- And results in a smaller value estimation of the capacitance  $C_x$

$$\widetilde{C}_x = \frac{C_x}{1 + \frac{1 + C_x/C_f}{A}}$$

- Or a relative error

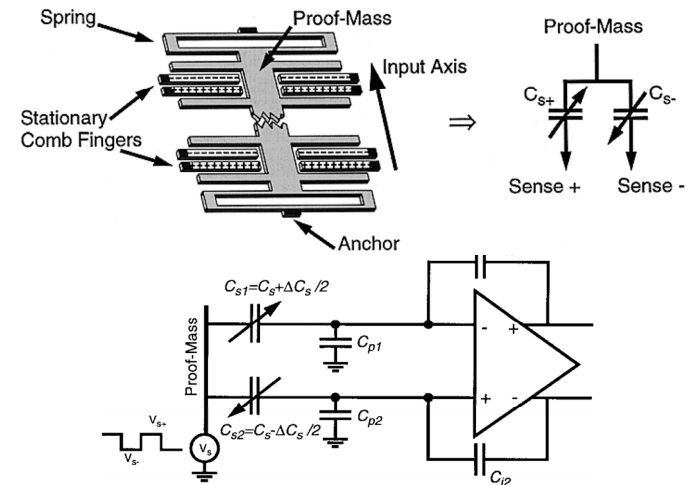
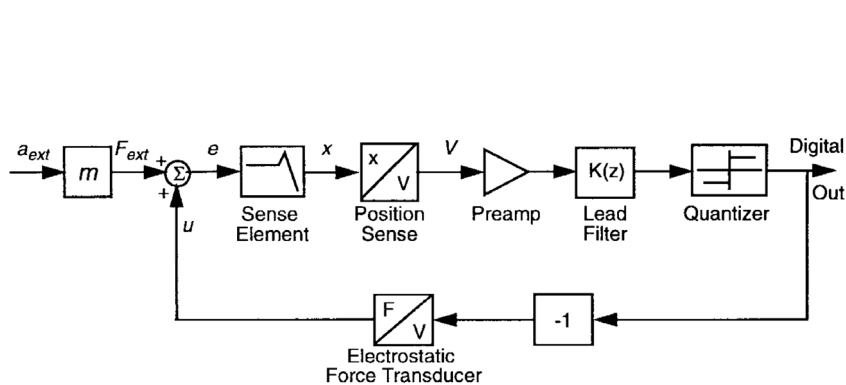
$$\varepsilon \triangleq \frac{\widetilde{C}_x - C_x}{C_x} \cong \frac{1 + C_x/C_f}{A}$$

# Smart Sensor System with First Order $\Sigma\Delta$ Modulator



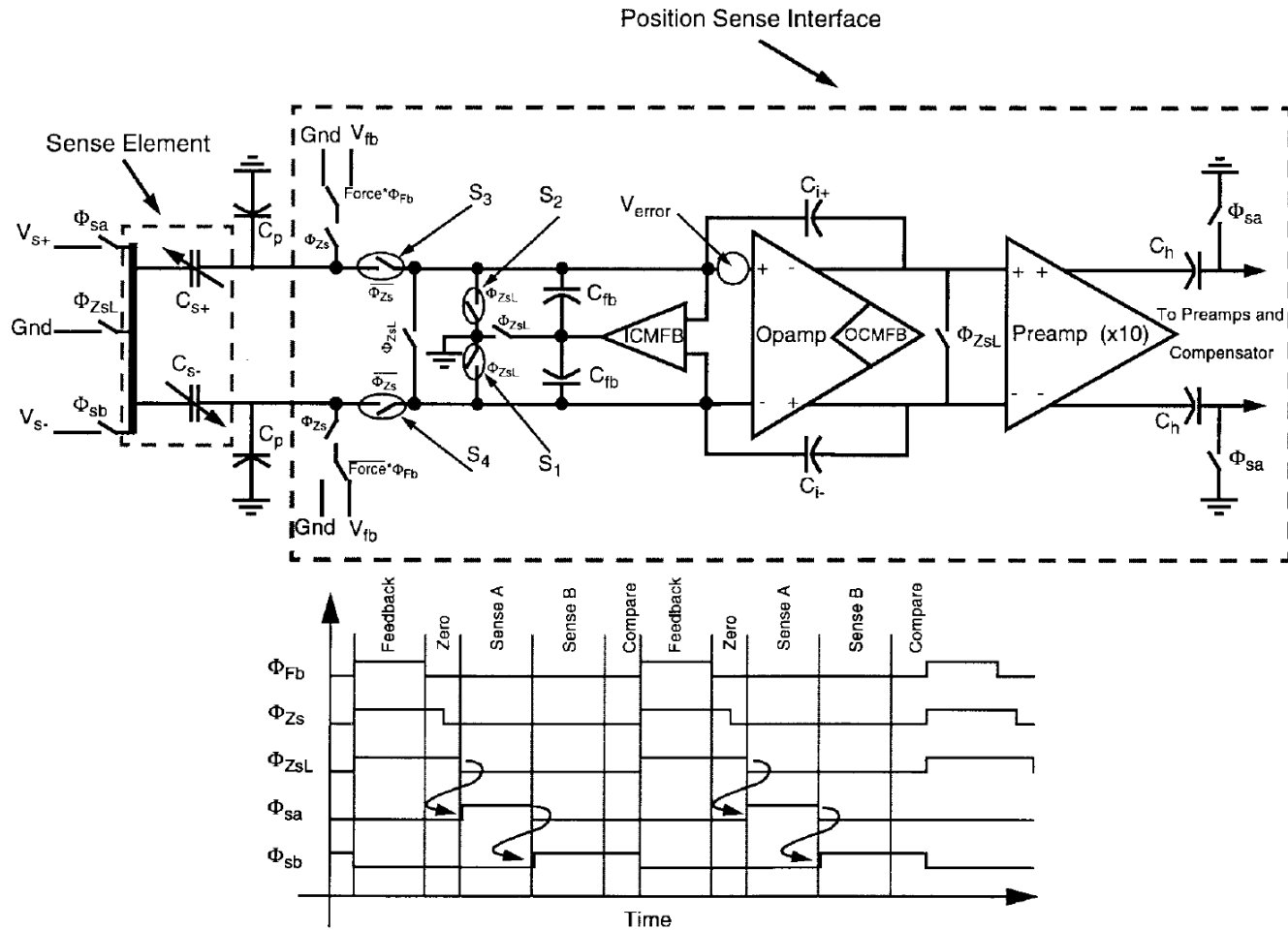
- Many capacitive sensor interfaces use the sensor directly in an oversampled  $\Sigma\Delta$  modulator
- High power consumption, because the capacitors must be charged and discharged at the rate of the high oversampling clock of the modulator
- Most of these sensor interfaces are designed for closed loop accelerometers where the electrostatic feedback force is used to keep the sensor mass in its balanced position for high linearity
- The mechanical transfer characteristic acts as a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order filter in the  $\Sigma\Delta$  loop, which makes the stability strongly dependent on the specific sensor
- Moreover, these systems need an important start-up time to bring the sensor mass close to equilibrium
- Not very suited for low-power (except if they are used as incremental ADC)

# Accelerometer Force-feedback Interface

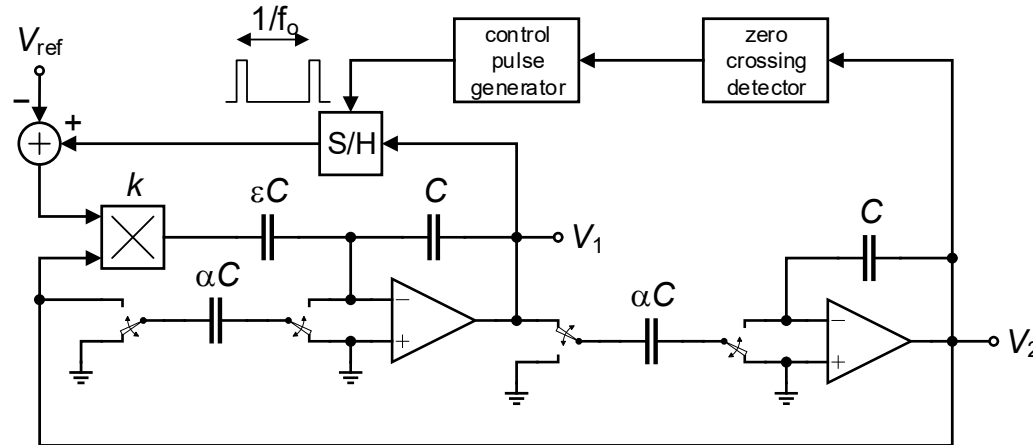


- Many MEMS accelerometers use the sensor directly in a  $\Sigma\Delta$  loop
- The electrostatic feedback force is used to keep the sensor mass in its balanced position to improve its linearity
- The accelerometer usually has a 2<sup>nd</sup>-order transfer function, which combined with a 1<sup>st</sup>-order  $\Sigma\Delta$  modulator gives a 3<sup>rd</sup>-order system which stability needs to be carefully studied
- Since the  $\Sigma\Delta$  modulator operates at a high oversampling clock frequency, these systems usually show a fairly high power consumption

# Accelerometer Force-feedback Interface



# Capacitance-to-Frequency Interface



- Quadrature SC oscillator combined with a automatic gain control (AGC) circuit for controlling the amplitude
- Oscillation output voltage  $V_1$  is sampled around the peak and compared to a reference voltage  $V_{ref}$
- Error signal controls the gain of an additional feedback path made of a multiplier and a capacitor  $\epsilon C$  which simulates positive or negative losses in the oscillator
- If  $\hat{V}_1 < V_{ref}$  the losses are made negative and the amplitude increases, whereas when  $\hat{V}_1 > V_{ref}$  the losses are made positive and the amplitude decreases
- A steady-state amplitude is achieved when  $\hat{V}_1 = V_{ref}$

## Capacitance-to-Frequency Interface

- It can be shown that the oscillation frequency is given by

$$f_o = \frac{f_c}{\pi} \cdot \sin^{-1} \left( \frac{\alpha}{2} \right) \cong \frac{f_c}{2\pi} \cdot \alpha$$

- where  $f_c$  is the clock frequency
- For small values of the capacitance ratio  $\alpha$  the above relation becomes linear

$$f_o \cong \frac{f_c}{2\pi} \cdot \alpha$$

- The frequency is therefore proportional to the capacitor ratio  $\alpha$  to be measured
- The capacitor to be measured  $C_m$  must assume the function of each of the switched capacitor  $\alpha C$  of the oscillator
- This can be accomplished by using an appropriate multiplexing as shown in the following schematic

# Capacitance-to-Frequency Interface

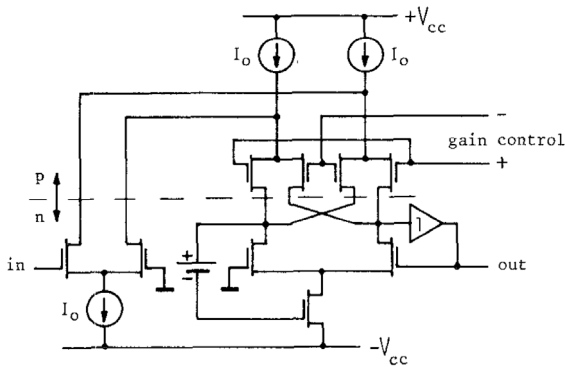
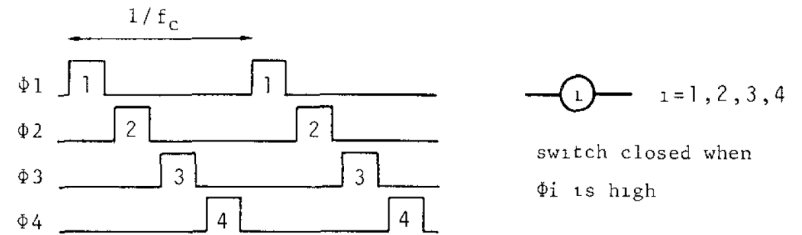
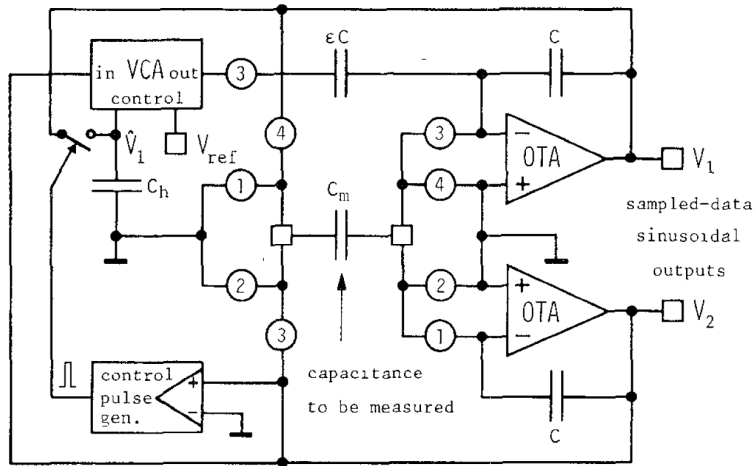


Fig. 5. CMOS voltage-controlled amplifier.

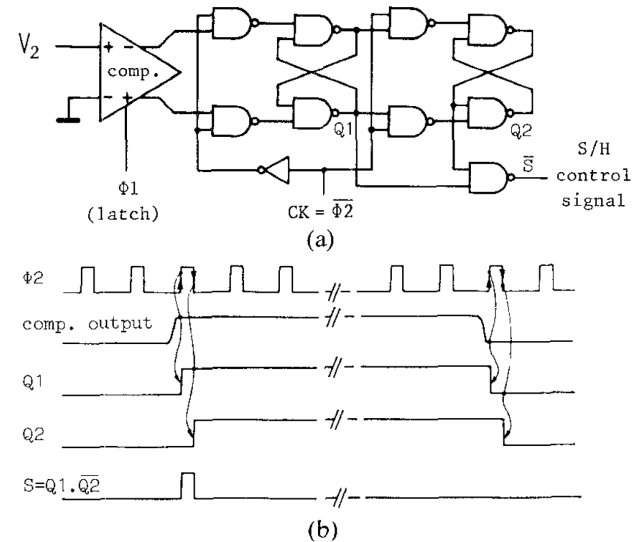
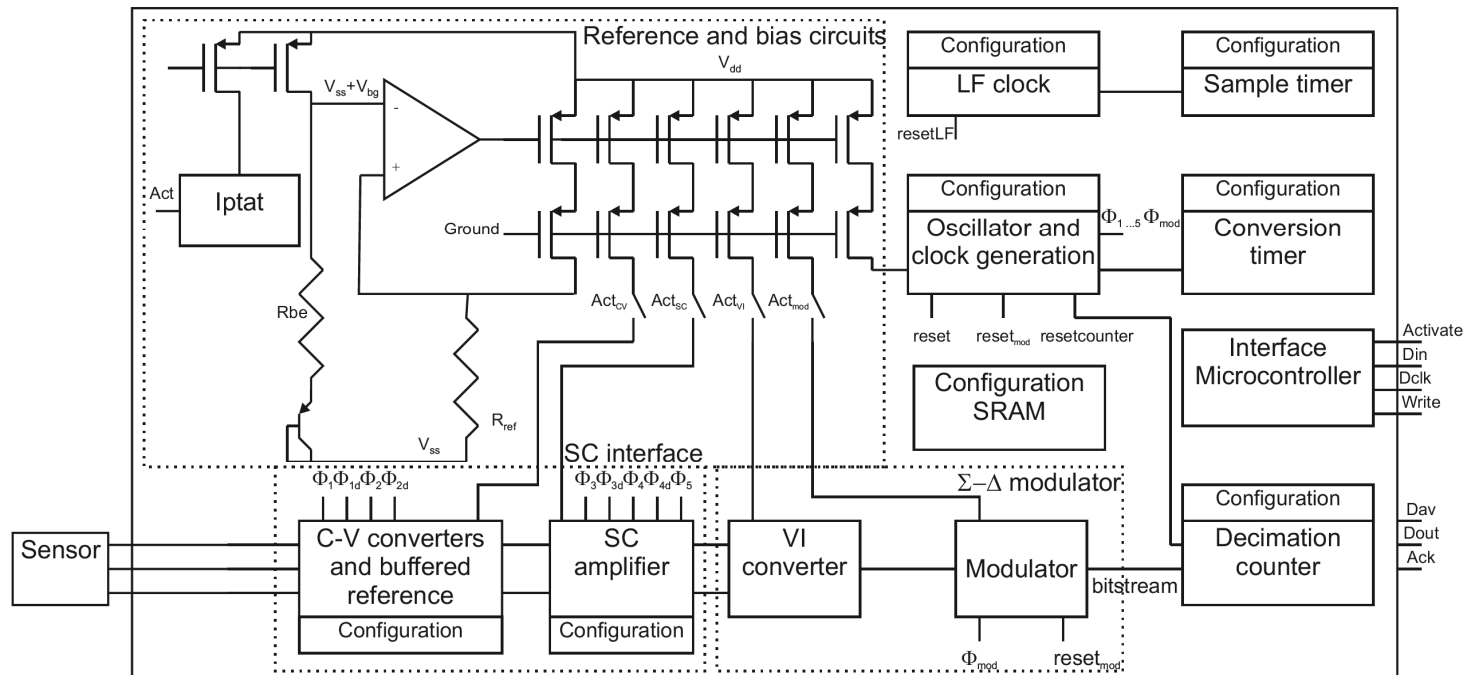
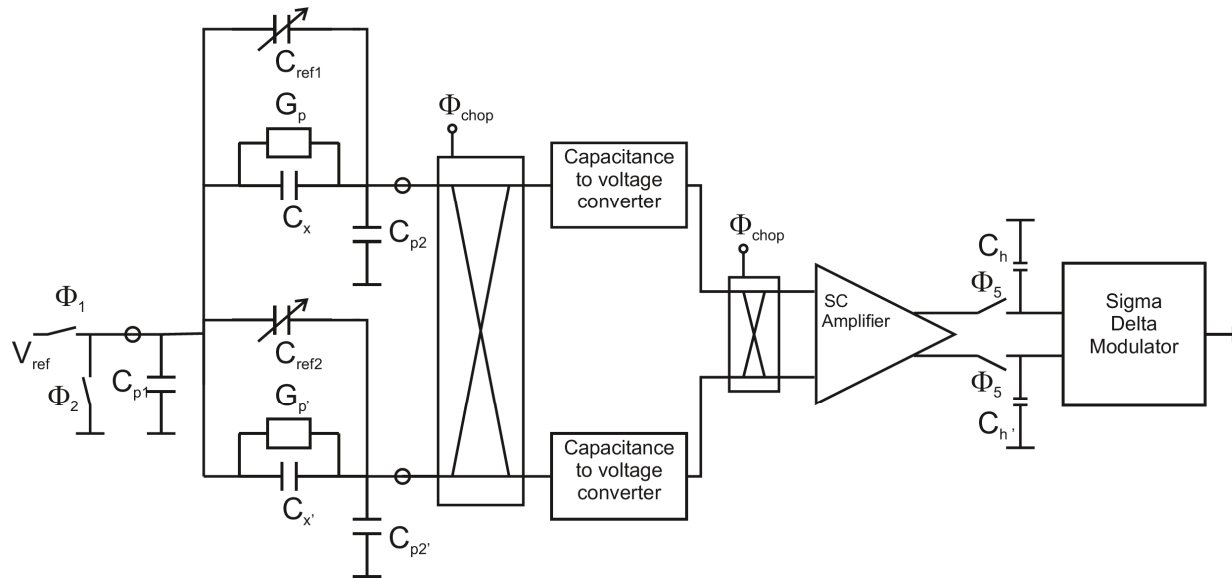


Fig. 6. Control pulse generator for the acquisition and the memorization of  $V_1$ . (a) Circuit schematic. (b) Timing diagram.

# Generic Sensor Interface Chip for Capacitive Sensors

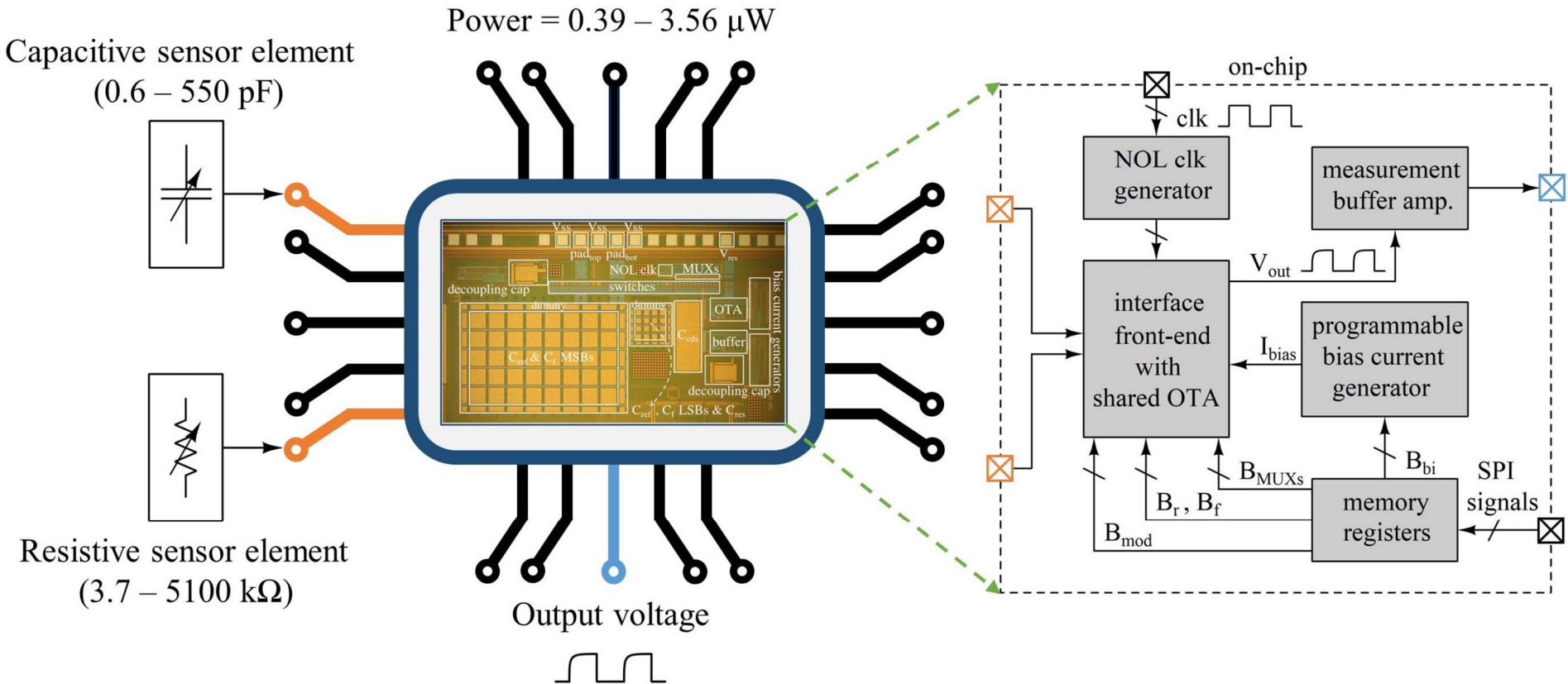


# Capacitive Sensor Readout Architecture



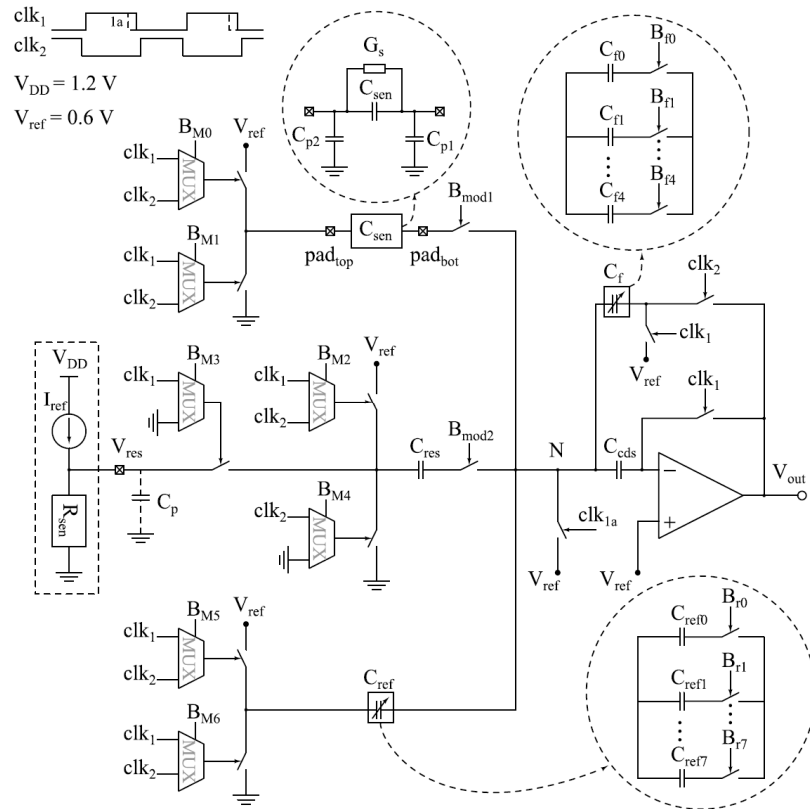
- Low frequency for the SC interface and higher frequency for the  $\Sigma\Delta$  modulator
- Reducing the clock frequency of the SC interface increases the influence of the parasitic shunt conductance which can cause a serious reliability problem

# Universal Multi-sensor Interface (UMSI)



# Universal Multi-sensor Interface (UMSI)

System configured for capacitance measurement



System configured for resistance measurement

