



# Achieving the cooperative and stepwise regulation of ESIDPT process in AFBD by introducing different electronic groups

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, the effect of different electronic group substituents on the excited state intramolecular double proton transfer (ESIDPT) in AFBD is comprehensively researched by using quantum chemistry methods. Two electronic groups with comparable capabilities, including the electron-withdrawing group (-Br) and the electron-donating group (-OCH<sub>3</sub>), are chosen to accomplish this study. The obtained geometric parameters, reduced density gradient and infrared spectra calculations have demonstrated that AFBD and its two derivatives experience the ESIDPT process. Subsequently, the conclusion of the potential energy surface and Bonn-Oppenheimer molecular dynamics further unveil that AFBD undergoes a cooperative ESIDPT process at ~15 fs. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the introduction of -Br and -OCH<sub>3</sub> transforms the proton transfer path. That is: "the cooperative ESIDPT is converted into the stepwise ESIDPT". Besides, we also confirm that the substitution of the electronic groups OCH<sub>3</sub>→H→Br can accelerate the ESIDPT process. Our work not only regulates the path of ESIDPT process, but also provides a time scale for this process, which is conducive to developing new intelligent fluorophores based on ESIDPT behavior.

## 1. Introduction

The excited state intramolecular proton transfer (ESIPT) process via intramolecular hydrogen bondings (IHBs) in organic compounds with bifunctional groups (acidic proton donor (-OH or -NH<sub>2</sub>) and basic proton receptor (-C=O or -C=N)) has long played a significant role in photophysics and photochemistry fields [1–3]. In general, dual fluorescence characteristics and large Stokes shift are the most representative signs of the ESIPT systems [4–9]. It is because of this tunable wide emission band that many molecules with ESIPT properties have been developed in a variety of scientific research fields such as fluorescent probes [10–12], molecular switches [13,14], organic luminous materials [15–17] and laser dyes [18].

In view of the previous reports, ESIPT has attracted a lot of attention and has been investigated through various experimental and theoretical methods [19–24]. For example, Li et al. demonstrated that the presence of the electron acceptor (-NO<sub>2</sub> group) in HBI molecule favored the ESIPT process, while the presence of the electron donor (-NH<sub>2</sub> group) hindered the ESIPT process [19]. Yang et al. revealed that nonpolar solvents are

more beneficial to the ESIPT behavior of BDTBP compounds than polar solvents [20]. The attenuation of atomic electronegativity enhances the IHBs of URA and thus facilitating the ESIPT process, which has been proved by Shang et al. [21]. In other words, substituents, solvent polarity and atomic electronegativity can effectively adjust the ESIPT process. Particularly, the ESIPT also involves excited state intramolecular double proton transfer (ESIDPT). Recently, many scientific researchers have also successively explored the impact of external environment on the ESIDPT systems. Zhao et al. predominately probed into the ESIDPT process of HPBB compounds in aprotic solvents with different polarities [25], they proposed that polar solvents promote the stepwise ESIDPT process of HPBB. Yu et al. investigated the effect of solvents on the ESIDPT behavior in 7AI dimer [26]. They confirmed that the ESIDPT followed a cooperative mechanism in non-polar solvents and polar solvents with low dielectric constant. And in polar solvents with larger permittivity, the ESIDPT follows a stepwise mechanism. It can be seen that solvent polarity can effectively regulate the stepwise and cooperative mechanisms. The difference is that we have systematically modified the molecular structure through electronic groups with

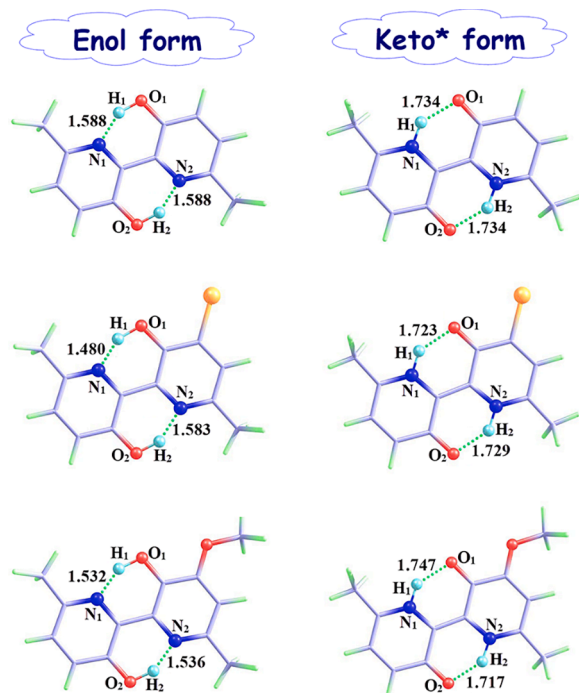
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**Table 1**  
Indexes describing the ability of different electronic groups.

	AFBD-OCH <sub>3</sub>	AFBD	AFBD-Br
electronic groups	OCH <sub>3</sub>	H	Br
σp	-0.27	0.00	0.23



**Fig. 1.** The enol form in the S<sub>0</sub> state and the keto\* form in the S<sub>1</sub> state of the AFBD (up), AFBD-Br (middle) and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> (down).

different  $\sigma_p$  value (Table 1) and successfully realized the conversion of both mechanisms [27,28]. Wherein, the  $\sigma_p$  represents the ability of electron-withdrawing and electron-donating groups. The more negative the  $\sigma_p$  index is, the stronger the ability to electron-donating, the more positive the  $\sigma_p$  index is, the stronger the ability to electron-withdrawing.

The 4-Alkyne-Functionalized [2, 2'-Bipyridine]-3, 3'-diol (AFBD) is a typical proton transfer fluorophore [29]. Considering the pre-existing dual IHBs in the molecular structure, the ESIDPT process is likely to occur after photoexcitation. Therefore, based on density functional theory (DFT) and time-dependent DFT (TD-DFT) methods in this work, AFBD is used as an ideal model to explore the influence of different substituents on ESIDPT process. First of all, we optimize the geometric structure of target molecules and simulate the infrared spectra, which confirm the occurrence of ESIDPT process in AFBD and its two derivatives. Subsequently, the difference in charge distribution before and after electron transition are analyzed by frontier molecular orbitals and charge density difference maps. In addition, we perform relaxation scanning on the potential energy surface of S<sub>0</sub> and S<sub>1</sub> states, determining that the three compounds undergo the ESIDPT process in the S<sub>1</sub> state. Finally, we evaluate the characteristics of excited state hydrogen bonding dynamics under different substituents and reveal the path and time scale of the ESIDPT process.

## 2. Computational details

All calculations are performed using Gaussian software [30]. According to the theoretical research of Oftadeh et al., the reliability of 6-31++G basis set has been proved [31]. To further ensure the accuracy

**Table 2**  
The primary bond lengths (Å) of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in the S<sub>0</sub> and S<sub>1</sub> states.

	AFBD		AFBD-Br		AFBD-OCH <sub>3</sub>	
	S <sub>0</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>	S <sub>0</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>	S <sub>0</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>
N <sub>1</sub> -H <sub>1</sub>	1.558	1.037	1.480	1.036	1.532	1.034
H <sub>1</sub> -O <sub>1</sub>	1.049	1.734	1.076	1.723	1.057	1.747
N <sub>2</sub> -H <sub>2</sub>	1.558	1.037	1.583	1.037	1.536	1.037
H <sub>2</sub> -O <sub>2</sub>	1.049	1.734	1.042	1.729	1.056	1.717

of the calculation, six different functionals with the 6-31++G basis set are chosen to calculate the absorption peak of AFBD and its two derivatives in acetonitrile solvent (see Table S1), and the result obtained by the B3PW91 functional is the closest to the experimental value. The geometric configurations of three compounds are optimized by the DFT and TD-DFT methods. Based on the optimized structure, we calculate the infrared (IR) spectra, frontier molecular orbitals (FMOs) and potential energy surface (PES) at the B3PW91/6-31++G theoretical level. Moreover, the IR spectra adopts a frequency correction factor of 0.972 [32-34]. With regard to the solvent effect of acetonitrile, it is considered to use the polarizable continuum model applying the integral equation formal variable (IEFPCM) in the calculation of self-consistent reaction field (SCRF) [35-37]. For the study of excited state hydrogen bonding dynamics in three compounds, the classical trajectory calculation (Bonn-Oppenheimer molecular dynamics (BOMD)) is implemented in the S<sub>1</sub> state [38-40]. In addition, Multiwfn software [41] is used to analyze the reduced density gradient (RDG) and charge density difference (CDD) maps, and VMD software is used for visualization [42].

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Structural analysis

Fig. 1 presents optimized geometric structures of the S<sub>0</sub> and S<sub>1</sub> states for AFBD and its two derivatives in acetonitrile solvent at the B3PW91/6-31++G level. It can be clearly observed that there are four intramolecular hydrogen bondings, which are named R<sub>1</sub> (O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>...N<sub>1</sub>), R<sub>2</sub> (O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>...N<sub>2</sub>), R<sub>3</sub> (N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>...O<sub>1</sub>) and R<sub>4</sub> (N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub>...O<sub>2</sub>) respectively. In the meantime, Table 2 collect the primary structural parameters involved in the IHBs of three compounds in acetonitrile solvent.

As shown in Fig. 1, for the enol form, the R<sub>1</sub> and R<sub>2</sub> bond lengths of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> are 1.558 Å, 1.480 Å, 1.532 Å and 1.559 Å, 1.536 Å, 1.583 Å respectively. It is easy to see that the IHBs (R<sub>1</sub> and R<sub>2</sub>) is strengthened under the substitution of electron withdrawing (-Br) groups. For the keto\* form, we can observe that the original R<sub>1</sub> and R<sub>2</sub> have been broken and two new IHBs have been formed, namely R<sub>3</sub> and R<sub>4</sub>. The R<sub>3</sub> and R<sub>4</sub> bond lengths in three compounds are 1.734 Å, 1.747 Å, 1.723 Å and 1.734 Å, 1.717 Å, 1.729 Å respectively. All the alterations demonstrate that the introduction of electronic groups can effectively affect the IHBs intensity, which is beneficial to the proceeding of ESIDPT in three compounds.

### 3.2. Reduced density gradient (RDG) analysis

The RDG function is first proposed by Yang and his co-authors [43], which can clearly describe the molecular interaction and the intensity of interaction in real space. As follows:

$$RDG(r) = \frac{1}{2(3\pi^2)^{1/3}} \frac{|\nabla\rho(r)|}{\rho(r)^{4/3}} \quad (1)$$

Wherein,  $|\nabla\rho(r)|$  is the mode of electron density gradient,  $\rho(r)$  is the total electron density. Based on this, Lu and co-workers recently propose the interaction region indicator (IRI) isosurface [44], as shown in Eq. (2)

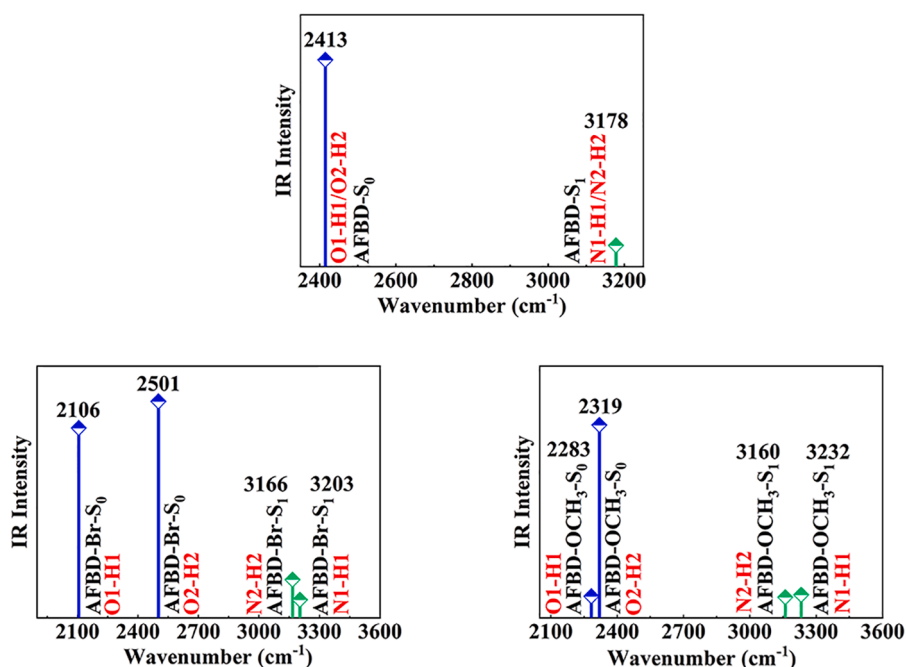


Fig. 2. The infrared (IR) spectra of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent.

$$IRI(r) = \frac{|\nabla\rho(r)|}{\rho(r)^a} \quad (2)$$

Herein,  $a$  is set equal to 1.1 in the standard definition. Same with the commonly used RDG analysis, the IRI isosurface can be used to distinguish diverse interaction intensity and corresponding characteristics in different regions simultaneously. The  $\text{sign}(I_2)r(\text{a.u.})$  function in RDG is projected onto the IRI isosurface through different colors. The blue represents hydrogen bonding interaction, the red denotes steric effects and green refers to the Vander Waals (VDW) forces, respectively.

In order to reveal the position and intensity of intramolecular hydrogen bonding interaction, Fig. S1 provides the RDG diagrams and gradient isosurfaces of three compounds. The spikes in the circles indicate the strength of the intramolecular hydrogen bonding. In addition, the blue disks on the isosurface corresponds to the peaks in the circles.

In the  $S_0$  state, the spike position at  $-0.07 \sim -0.08$  for AFBD unveils the hydrogen bonding interactions of  $O_1-H_1 \dots N_1$  and  $O_2-H_2 \dots N_2$ . The IHBS interactions corresponding to the AFBD-Br are  $O_1-H_1 \dots N_1$  and  $O_2-H_2 \dots N_2$  with the spike peaks of  $-0.09 \sim -0.10$  and  $-0.07 \sim -0.08$ . There are two spike peaks with similar intensity near  $-0.08$  in

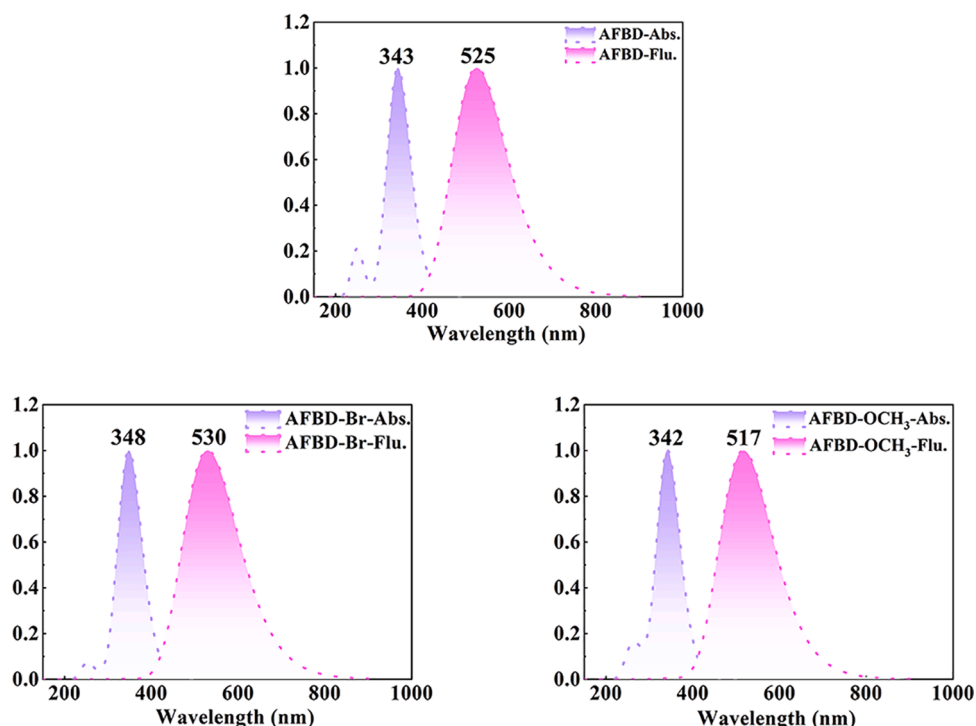


Fig. 3. The normalized absorption and fluorescence spectra of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent.

**Table 3**

The absorption characteristics of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent at the theoretical level of TDDFT/B3PW91/6-31++G. (H and L represent HOMO and LUMO, respectively).

	State	E <sub>abs</sub> (eV)	λ <sub>abs</sub> (nm)	f	Contribution	CI (%)
AFBD	S <sub>1</sub>	3.610eV	343	0.4416	H→L	69.93%
	S <sub>2</sub>	4.265eV	291	0.0014	H-2→L	70.44%
AFBD-Br	S <sub>5</sub>	4.970eV	249	0.0929	H→L + 2	64.42%
	S <sub>1</sub>	3.562eV	348	0.4805	H→L	69.91%
	S <sub>2</sub>	4.248eV	292	0.0011	H-2→L	70.40%
	S <sub>3</sub>	4.462eV	278	0.0049	H-1→L	64.72%
	S <sub>4</sub>	4.595eV	270	0.0002	H→L + 1	64.27%
	S <sub>6</sub>	4.922eV	252	0.0336	H→L + 2	55.76%
AFBD-OCH <sub>3</sub>	S <sub>1</sub>	3.628eV	342	0.4363	H→L	69.82%
	S <sub>2</sub>	4.377eV	283	0.0010	H-2→L	70.41%
	S <sub>3</sub>	4.451eV	279	0.0242	H-1→L	66.15%
	S <sub>4</sub>	4.917eV	267	0.0288	H→L + 1	66.12%
	S <sub>5</sub>	4.917eV	252	0.0343	H→L + 2	57.36%
	S <sub>6</sub>	5.322eV	233	0.0001	H-5→L	53.12%

AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub>, representing the IHBs of O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>...N<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub>...N<sub>2</sub>. Here, for O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>...N<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub>...N<sub>2</sub>, the strength of IHBs in different electronic groups follows the order of Br>OCH<sub>3</sub>>H and OCH<sub>3</sub>>H>Br, respectively. This result is consistent with the structural analysis. For the S<sub>1</sub> state, the two spike peaks of three compounds are located in the vicinity of -0.04 ~ -0.05, which are attributed to the two new IHBs O<sub>1</sub>...H<sub>1</sub>-N<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>...H<sub>2</sub>-N<sub>2</sub>. During the process from S<sub>0</sub> to S<sub>1</sub> state, the IHBs undergo a change, where the protons H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> transfer to the N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> atoms. Therefore, the above results confirm the occurrence of ESIDPT in the S<sub>1</sub> state.

### 3.3. Infrared (IR) spectra

The IR spectra is considered an effective tool to evaluate the ESPT process [45,46]. In order to prove the point put forward in the previous section again: "The ESIDPT process happen in the S<sub>1</sub> state". We simulate the IR spectra (scale factor 0.972) of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub>. The calculated vibration frequency scopes from 2100cm<sup>-1</sup> to 3600cm<sup>-1</sup>, including only the vibration peaks of O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>, O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>, N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> groups associated with the IHBs.

As shown in Fig. 2, due to the symmetric structure of AFBD, there is

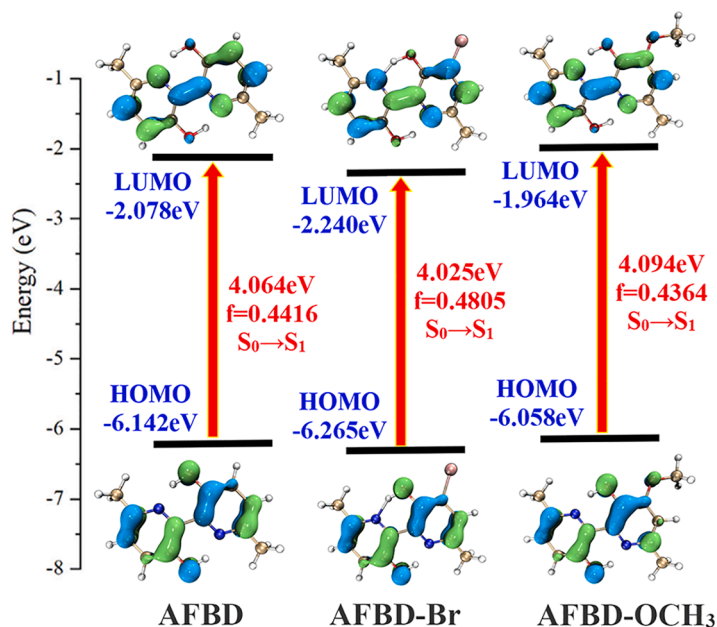
only a vibration peak near 2413cm<sup>-1</sup> in the S<sub>0</sub> state and 3178cm<sup>-1</sup> in the S<sub>1</sub> state, which is attributed to O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>&O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>&N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> stretching vibration respectively. For the AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub>, the O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> vibration peaks are 2106 cm<sup>-1</sup>, 2283 cm<sup>-1</sup> and 2501 cm<sup>-1</sup>, 2319 cm<sup>-1</sup> in the S<sub>0</sub> state. When excited to the S<sub>1</sub> state, the N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> vibration peaks are separately located at 3199 cm<sup>-1</sup>, 3232 cm<sup>-1</sup> and 3176cm<sup>-1</sup>, 3160cm<sup>-1</sup>. Interestingly, it can be seen that from the S<sub>0</sub> state to the S<sub>1</sub> state, the original O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> vibration peaks disappear in three compounds, while the new N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> vibrational peaks form. It indicates that the proton H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> are transferred from proton donors O<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> to proton receptors N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>, realizing the ESIDPT process.

### 3.4. Electronic spectra and frontier molecular orbitals (FMOs)

For to get to know the effect of different electronic groups on the photophysical properties in target molecule, Fig. 3 has shown the electronic spectra of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent at the level of TD-DFT/B3PW91/6-31++G. Their absorption characteristics in the first six singlet excited states are gathered in Table 3, including the lowest vertical excitation energies (E<sub>abs</sub>), absorption peaks (λ<sub>abs</sub>), corresponding oscillator strengths (f>0) and orbital transition contributions. In addition, based on the optimized S<sub>1</sub> configuration of AFBD and its two derivatives in acetonitrile solvent, we calculate and draw the corresponding fluorescence spectra in Fig. 3.

As noted in Fig. 3, the theoretical absorption and fluorescence peaks of AFBD in acetonitrile solvent are at 343 nm and 525 nm respectively, which are consistent with the experimental data of 345 nm and 506 nm [29]. It suggests that the selected functional is dependable. Moreover, the absorption and fluorescence peaks of AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> separately are 348 nm, 342 nm and 530 nm, 517 nm. It is worth mentioning that the Stokes shifts are generated by keto form in AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> are 182 nm, 182 nm and 175 nm. The above finds indicate that the three compounds are endowed with excellent optical behaviors due to the large Stokes shift, which make them have a potential application prospect in many cutting-edge fields.

Subsequently, in order to exhibit the transition contribution from the ground state to each electron excited state, we calculate the contribution of each transition with oscillation strength (f) greater than 0.02 in three compounds and plot them into the refined absorption spectra in Fig. S2.



**Fig. 4.** The frontier molecular orbitals (FMOs) and HOMO→LUMO energy gaps of AFBD, AFBD-Br, and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent.

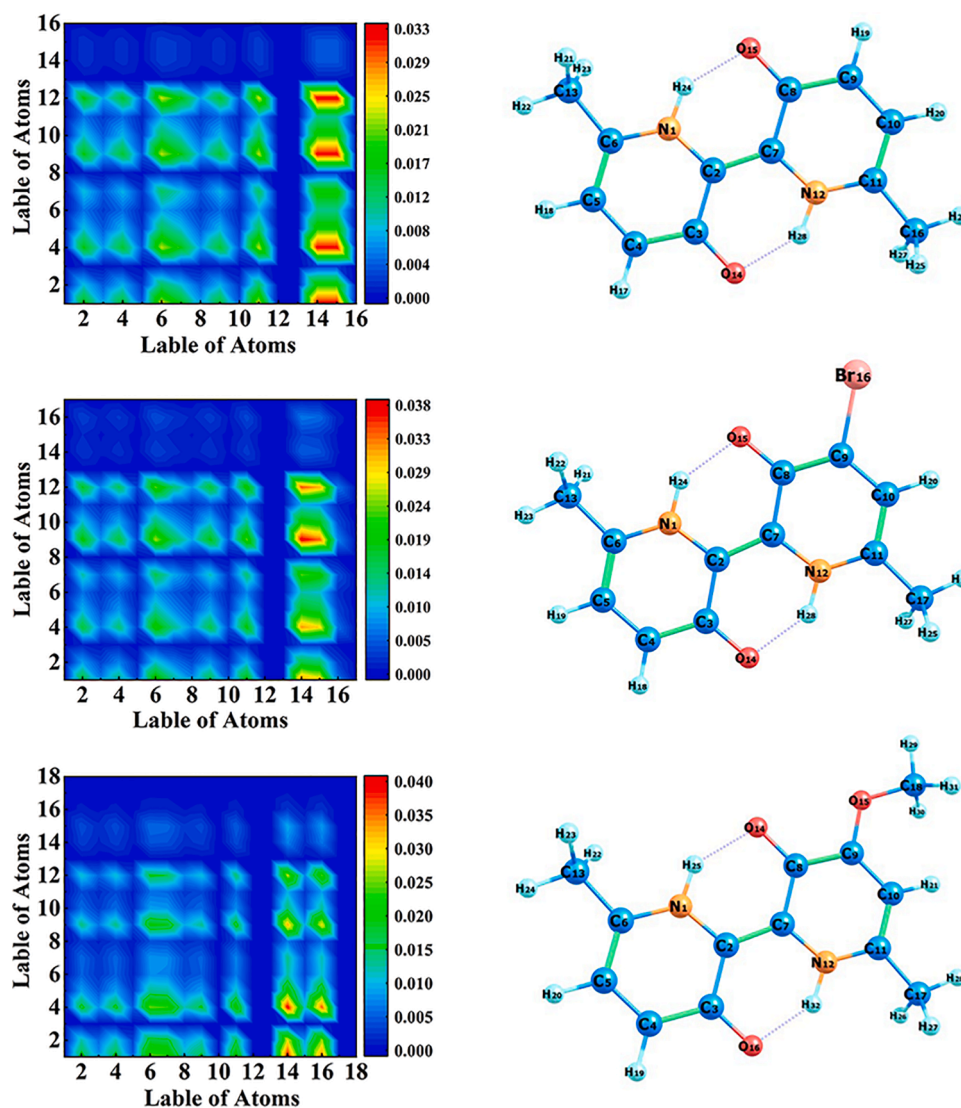


Fig. 5. The transition density matrix (TDM) and atomic numbers diagrams of AFBD (up), AFBD-Br (middle) and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> (down) in acetonitrile solvent.

Among them, the horizontal position of the black vertical lines is the absorption wavelength, and the height of the vertical lines is the oscillator strength (corresponding to the right axis). Significantly, the dual absorption peaks have emerged, and the lower intensity principally stems from the transition  $S_0 \rightarrow S_5$  of AFBD, AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> and  $S_0 \rightarrow S_6$  of AFBD-Br. According to expectation, their maximum absorption peaks completely spring from the first singlet state transition ( $S_0 \rightarrow S_1$ ), which is dominantly related to the HOMO  $\rightarrow$  LUMO transition (see Table 3). It follows that only the HOMO and LUMO in three compounds are displayed in Fig. 4. As shown in the FMOs diagram, the substitution of electronic groups  $OCH_3 \rightarrow H \rightarrow Br$  makes the HOMO  $\rightarrow$  LUMO energy gaps gradually narrow, thereby resulting in the red-shift of the absorption peak from AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> (342 nm) to AFBD (343 nm) and AFBD-Br (348 nm). Additionally, the HOMO  $\rightarrow$  LUMO transition exhibits  $\pi-\pi^*$  type feature, which plays an important role in facilitating the excited state proton transfer behavior. We also notice that the electron density distribution moves from the proton donors ( $O_1$  and  $O_2$ ) to the proton acceptors ( $N_1$  and  $N_2$ ), which make the acidity and basicity of the proton donor and acceptor parts stronger and further promoting the progress of the ESIDPT.

In addition to these, we also refer to the atomic numbers of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> to analyze their transition density matrix (TDM) diagrams. As illustrated in Fig. 5, it can be seen that the charge

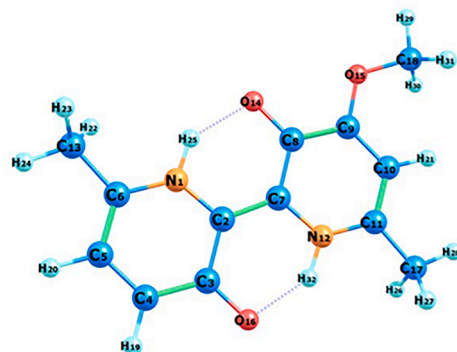


Fig. 6. Calculated the charge density difference (CDD) maps related to the  $S_0 \rightarrow S_1$  transition.

density of atoms No. 4 and No. 9 in the diagonal matrix has significantly changed after photoexcitation. At the same time, we find that two hydroxy oxygens (No.14 and No.15) show strong electron-hole correlation with  $N_2$  atom (No.12), C atom (No.9) and  $N_1$  atom (No.1), C atom (No.4) respectively via analyzing the off-diagonal elements. The correlation of these regions implies that the charge population has obvious differences before and after the electronic transition. That is, the intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) process can occur in the electronic excited state.

To more intuitively study the change in electron density during the process of light excitation, the CDD maps of AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> from the  $S_0$  state to the  $S_1$  state are visualized in Fig. 6. The red and blue separately indicate the regions with increasing and decreasing charge density. Apparently, the net electron density of the

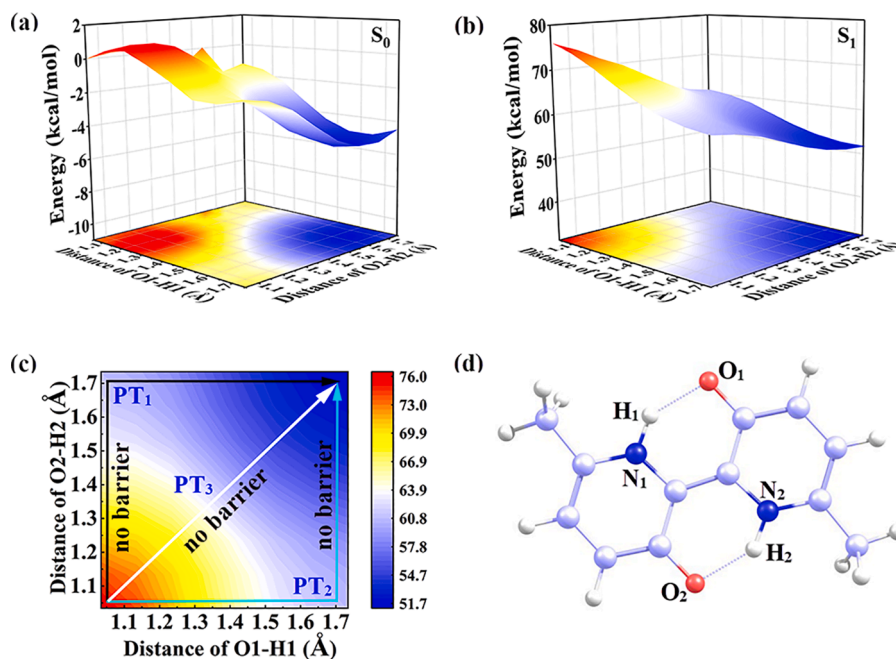


Fig. 7. The  $S_0$ - (a) and  $S_1$ -stated (b) PES for AFBD in acetonitrile solvent. (c) Top view of the  $S_1$  stated PES. (d) The geometry of AFBD in the  $S_1$  state.

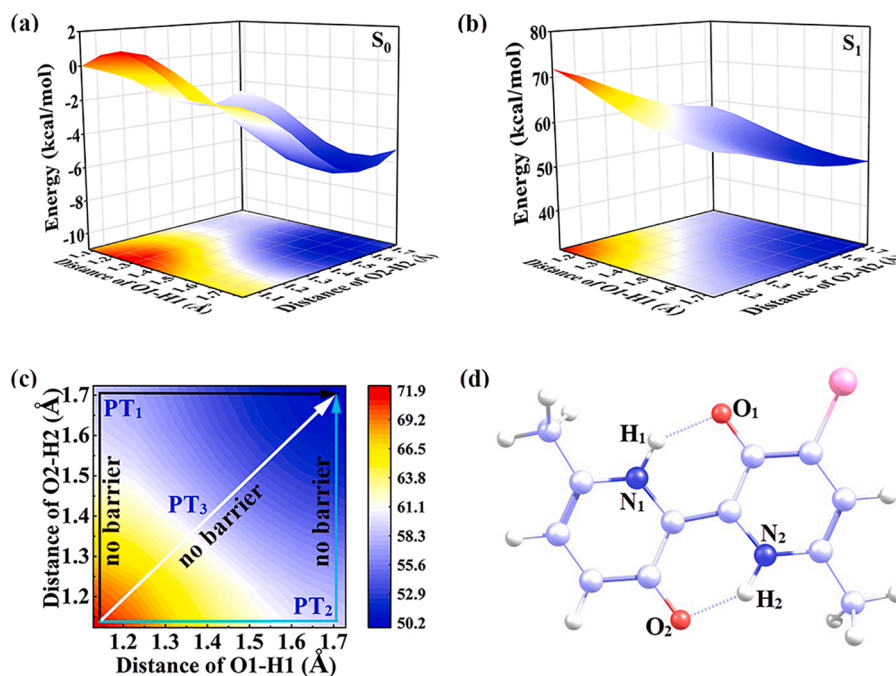


Fig. 8. The  $S_0$ - (a) and  $S_1$ -stated (b) PES for AFBD-Br in acetonitrile solvent. (c) Top view of the  $S_1$  stated PES. (d) The geometry of AFBD-Br in the  $S_1$  state.

two hydroxyl oxygens ( $O_1$  and  $O_2$ ) related to the ESIDPT process decreases, while that of the proton receptors ( $N_1$  and  $N_2$ ) increases. This remarkable ICT explains that the electronegativities of nitrogen atoms in the  $S_1$  state is stronger than that of oxygen atoms. Therefore, the CDD analysis indicates that the ability of two nitrogen atoms ( $N_1$  and  $N_2$ ) to attract the protons ( $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ) is strengthened, which in turn accelerates the occurrence of ESIDPT process.

### 3.5. Potential energy surface (PES)

Owing to the presence of dual IHBs in AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD- $OCH_3$ , the pathway experienced by the ESIDPT process is an

important point worth pondering and discussing. Therefore, for the sake of addressing this issue and concurrently providing precise energy barriers required for proton transfer process. We scan the 3D potential energy surface in the  $S_0$  and  $S_1$  states of AFBD (in Fig. 7), AFBD-Br (in Fig. 8) and AFBD- $OCH_3$  (in Fig. 9) along the possible photochemical reaction pathways by fixing  $O_1-H_2$  and  $O_2-H_2$  bond length from 1.0 Å to 1.8 Å in the step of 0.1 Å. And the top view of the  $S_0$  stated PES is detailed in Fig. S3. In addition, the possible proton transfer pathways have been marked on PES and can be divided into three types (PT<sub>1</sub> and PT<sub>2</sub> are defined as stepwise mechanism, PT<sub>3</sub> is a cooperative mechanism): (1) PT<sub>1</sub>→proton  $H_1$  first moves from  $O_1$  to  $N_1$ , and then proton  $H_2$  moves from  $O_2$  to  $N_2$ . (2) PT<sub>2</sub>→The situation is exactly opposite to PT<sub>1</sub>.

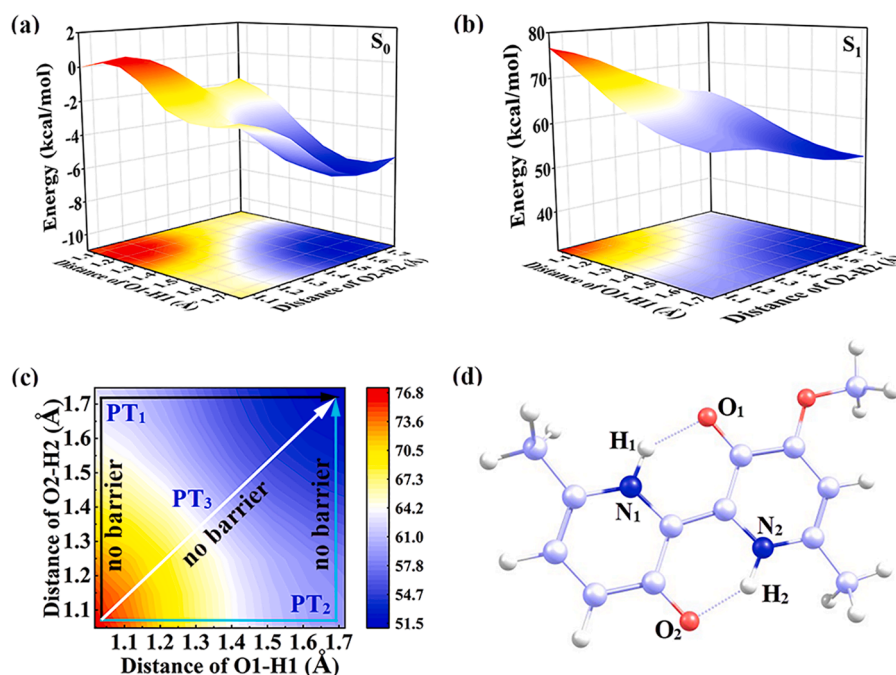


Fig. 9. The  $S_0$ - (a) and  $S_1$ -stated (b) PES for AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in acetonitrile solvent. (c) Top view of the  $S_1$  stated PES. (d) The geometry of AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in the  $S_1$  state.

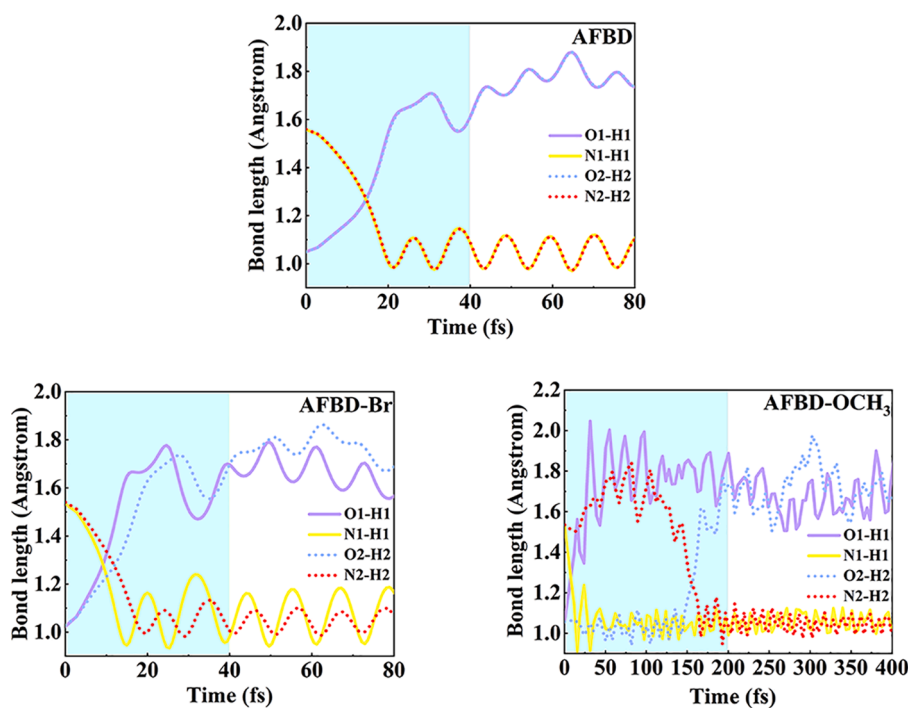


Fig. 10. The important bond length distances with time evolution for AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> in the  $S_1$  state.

(3) PT<sub>3</sub>→The two protons (H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>) move simultaneously from O<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> to N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>, respectively.

In the  $S_0$  state, the three different proton transfer pathways of AFBD and its two derivatives require overcoming about 0.37–1.14 kcal/mol energy barrier. It is noteworthy that, under excitation of light, the energy barriers of PT<sub>1</sub>, PT<sub>2</sub> and PT<sub>3</sub> in three compounds are all barrier free. These discussions indicate that the double proton transfer process in three compounds is more likely to occur in the  $S_1$  state than in the  $S_0$  state. However, it is not yet clear whether their ESIDPT process is a cooperative or stepwise mechanism.

### 3.6. Excited state hydrogen bonding dynamics

To further clarify the detailed excited state proton transfer mechanism and find out whether the stepwise ESIDPT or cooperative ESIDPT occur for three compounds. We theoretically present the time scale and characteristic of the ESIDPT process in AFBD, AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> at the fs level and further unveil via the excited state hydrogen bonding dynamics in Fig. 10 [47–50].

At the beginning of the simulation, the bond lengths O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> of AFBD gradually increase with extension of time, while those of N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>

and N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> gradually decrease with extension of time. This indicates that protons H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> rapidly move from O<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>2</sub> to N<sub>1</sub> and N<sub>2</sub> along intramolecular hydrogen bondings until protons H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> are transferred. In other words, the distance between O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>&N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> intersect with O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub>&N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> at ~15 fs. Combined with the potential energy surface analysis, AFBD occurs the cooperative (PT<sub>3</sub>) ESIDPT process at ~15 fs in the S<sub>1</sub> state.

When AFBD is substituted by electron-withdrawing (-Br) and electron-donating (-OCH<sub>3</sub>) groups, the path and time scale of the ESIDPT process are different due to the influence of charge distribution after photoexcitation. For AFBD-Br, the entire event occurs at ~12 fs. First, the O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> bond disrupts and the new N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub> bond forms at ~9 fs, then the O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> bond disrupts and the new N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> bond forms at ~12 fs, completing the stepwise (PT<sub>1</sub>→PT<sub>2</sub>) ESIDPT process. In AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub>, we do not observe the intersection of O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> and N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> within the maximum simulation time of 80 fs. Therefore, we expand the time step and set the simulation time to 400 fs. According to the breaking of O<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>&O<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub> and the formation of N<sub>1</sub>-H<sub>1</sub>&N<sub>2</sub>-H<sub>2</sub>, the whole stepwise (PT<sub>1</sub>→PT<sub>2</sub>) ESIDPT process has completed at ~155 fs. These results confirm that the substitution of the electronic groups OCH<sub>3</sub>→H→Br can accelerate the ESIDPT process.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this research, the influence of different electronic groups on the photophysical properties in AFBD and its two derivatives has been systematically investigated by the DFT and TD-DFT methods. The existence of the ESIDPT process in three compounds is proved by acquired geometric parameters, RDG scatter plots, and IR spectra data. From the FMOs and CDD maps, the obvious ICT features after light excitation can promote the ESIDPT process. Based on the scanned 3D potential energy surface, it could be found that the ESIDPT process is more inclined to happen in the S<sub>1</sub> state. Moreover, we also evaluate the time scale and characteristic of the ESIDPT process through excited state hydrogen bonding dynamics and confirm that AFBD experience a cooperative ESIDPT process at ~15 fs. More importantly, the cooperative ESIDPT is converted into the stepwise ESIDPT under the entry of the electron-withdrawing (-Br) and the electron-donating (-OCH<sub>3</sub>) groups. Besides, the entire stepwise ESIDPT in AFBD-Br and AFBD-OCH<sub>3</sub> occurs at ~12 fs and ~155 fs respectively. In a conclusion, the substitution of the electronic groups OCH<sub>3</sub>→H→Br not only changes the internal mechanism, but also facilitates the ESIDPT process.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Hongyan Mu:** Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Dan Li:** Data curation, Writing – original draft. **Jiaan Gao:** Methodology. **Yang Wang:** Investigation. **Yifu Zhang:** Software. **Guangyong Jin:** Resources, Supervision. **Hui Li:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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#### Supplementary materials

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