

(12) **United States Patent**
Potter

(10) **Patent No.:** **US 6,597,560 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Jul. 22, 2003**

(54) **MICRO-ELECTRO-MECHANICAL
VARACTOR AND A METHOD OF MAKING
AND USING THEREOF**

(75) Inventor: **Michael D. Potter**, Churchville, NY
(US)

(73) Assignee: **Rochester Institute of Technology**,
Rochester, NY (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this
patent is extended or adjusted under 35
U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

(21) Appl. No.: **10/096,398**

(22) Filed: **Mar. 12, 2002**

(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2002/0131230 A1 Sep. 19, 2002

Related U.S. Application Data

(60) Provisional application No. 60/275,288, filed on Mar. 13,
2001.

(51) **Int. Cl.**⁷ **H01G 7/00**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **361/277; 361/278; 361/279;
361/283.1; 361/291; 361/290**

(58) **Field of Search** **361/277, 278,
361/281, 321.1, 280, 300, 321.5, 313, 289,
290, 287, 283, 311, 322, 293**

(56) **References Cited**

U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS

4,490,772 A * 12/1984 Blickstein
4,716,331 A * 12/1987 Higgins, Jr.
5,081,513 A * 1/1992 Jackson et al.

5,526,172 A 6/1996 Kanack
5,771,148 A * 6/1998 Davis
5,959,516 A 9/1999 Chang et al.
6,094,102 A 7/2000 Chang et al.
6,177,351 B1 1/2001 Beratan et al.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

<http://ucsub.colorado.edu/~maz/research/background.html>
[Retrieved from Web site on Apr. 4, 2001].
[http://www.ece.ncsu.edu/erl/damemi/
switchproj.html#Array](http://www.ece.ncsu.edu/erl/damemi/switchproj.html#Array) [Retrieved from Web site on Apr. 4,
2001].
[http://www.eecs.umich.edu/RADLAB/bio/rebeiz/Current_
Research.html](http://www.eecs.umich.edu/RADLAB/bio/rebeiz/Current_Research.html) [Retrieved from Web site on Apr. 4, 2001].
A. R. Brown et al., "A Varactor-Tuned RF Filter," *IEEE
Transaction On Microwave Theory And Techniques*,
48:1157-1160 (2000).

* cited by examiner

Primary Examiner—Dean A. Reichard

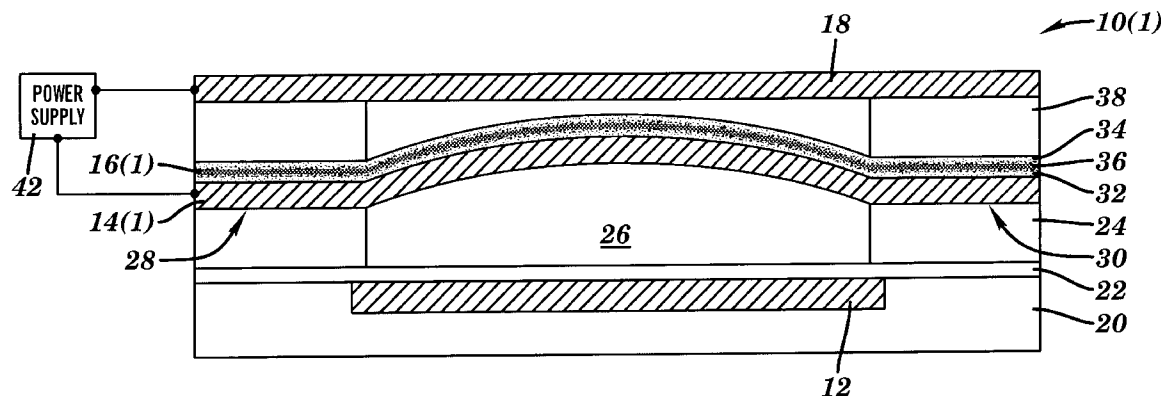
Assistant Examiner—Nguyen Ha

(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Nixon Peabody LLP

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A varactor includes a first capacitor plate, a second capacitor plate, at least one fixed charge holder, and a control electrode. The second capacitor plate is spaced from and movable towards and away from the first capacitor plate. At least one fixed charge holder with an imbedded charge is on at least a portion of the second capacitor plate. The control electrode is spaced from the second capacitor plate. Applying a bias to the control electrode moves the second capacitor plate towards or away from the first capacitor plate depending on the polarity of the applied bias.

7 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



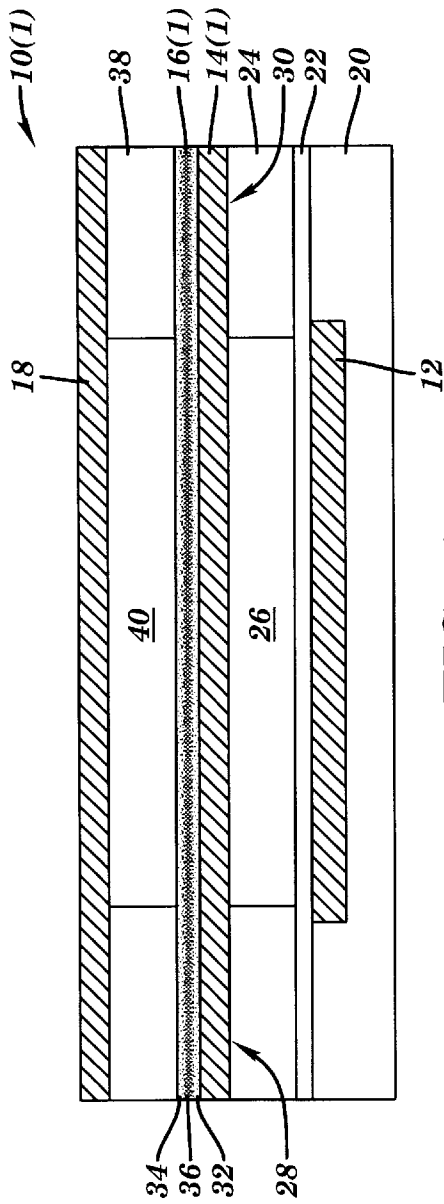


FIG. 1

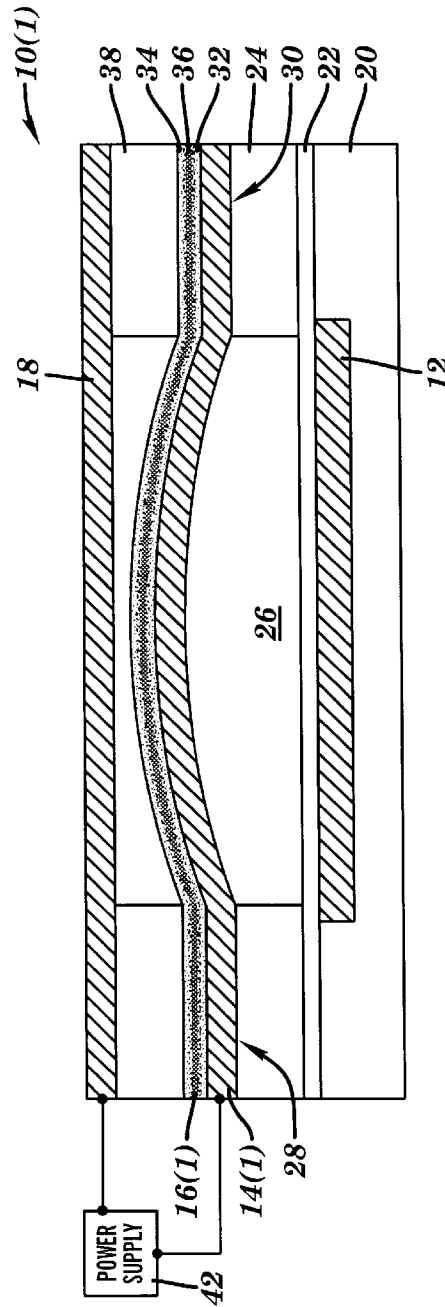


FIG. 2

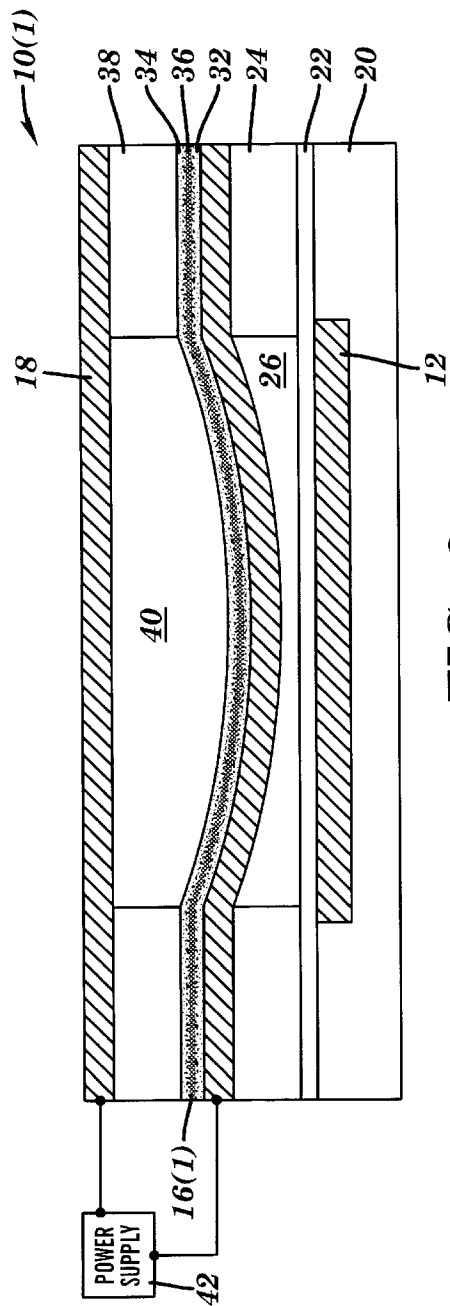


FIG. 3

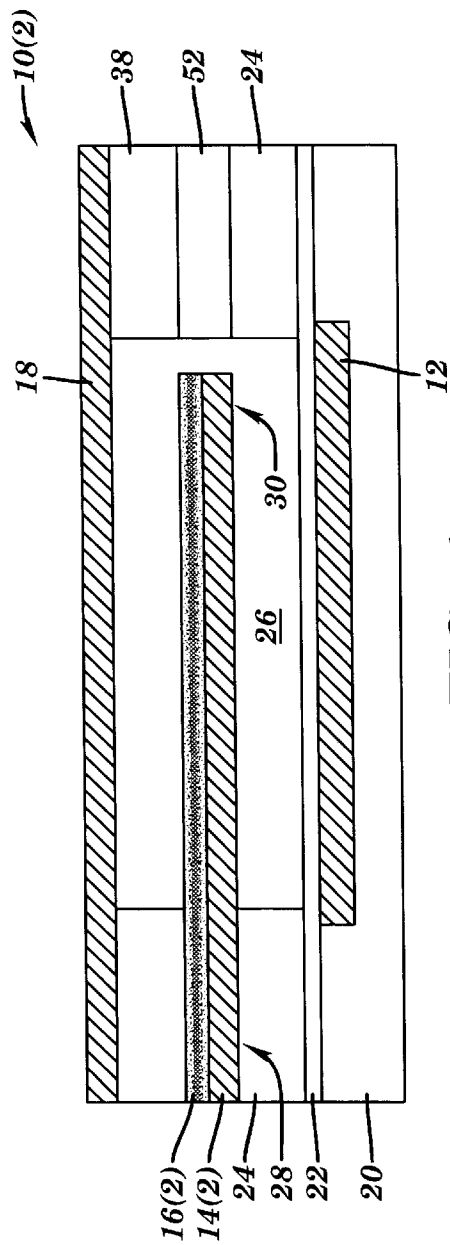
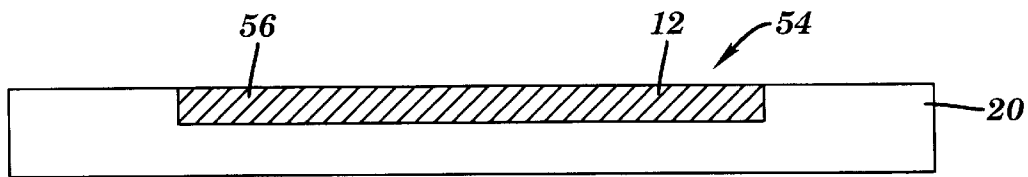
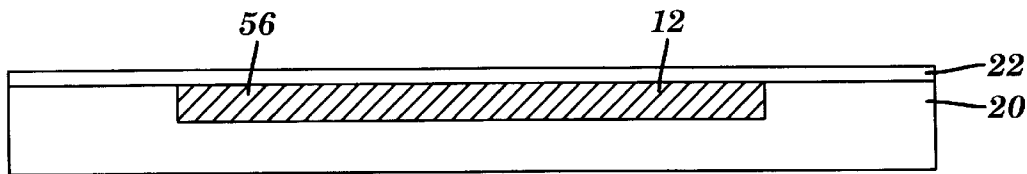
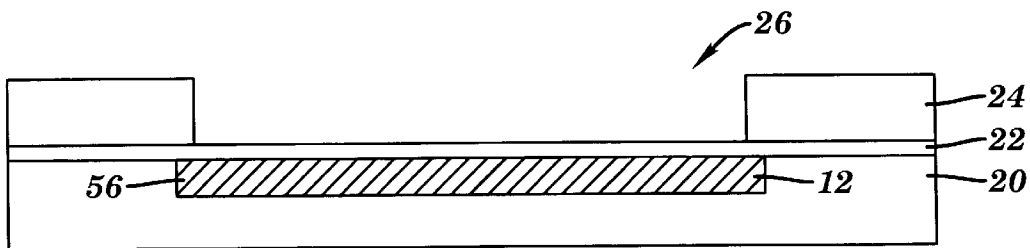
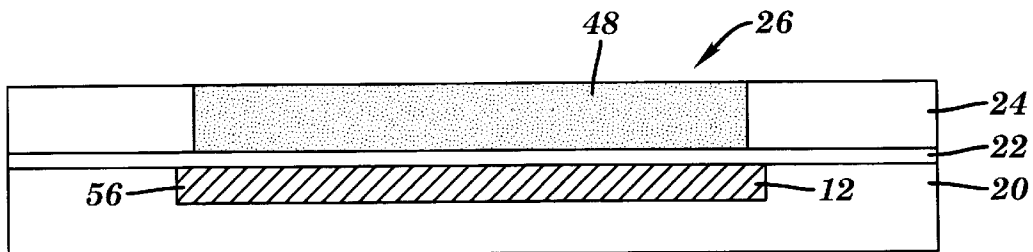


FIG. 4

**FIG. 5****FIG. 6****FIG. 7****FIG. 8**

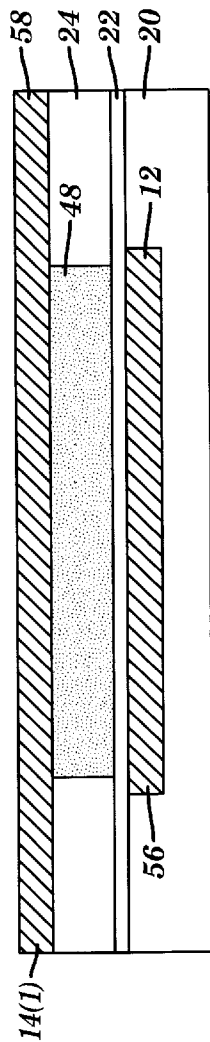


FIG. 9

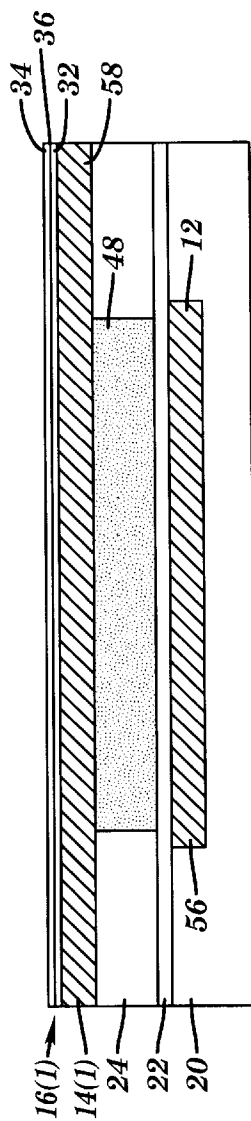


FIG. 10

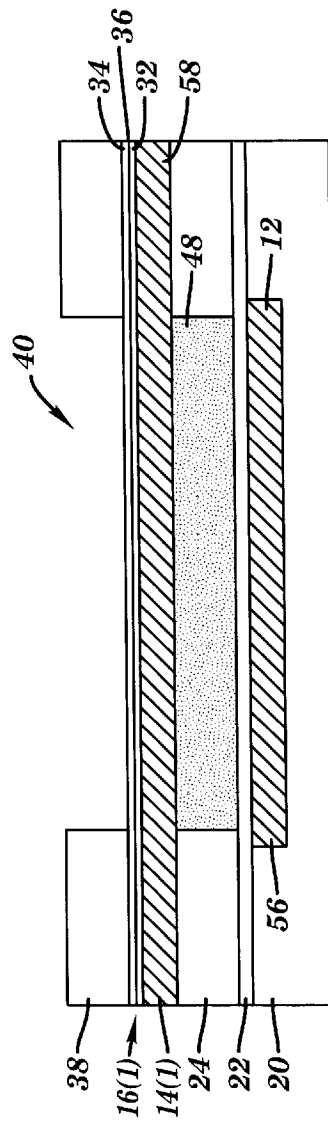


FIG. 11

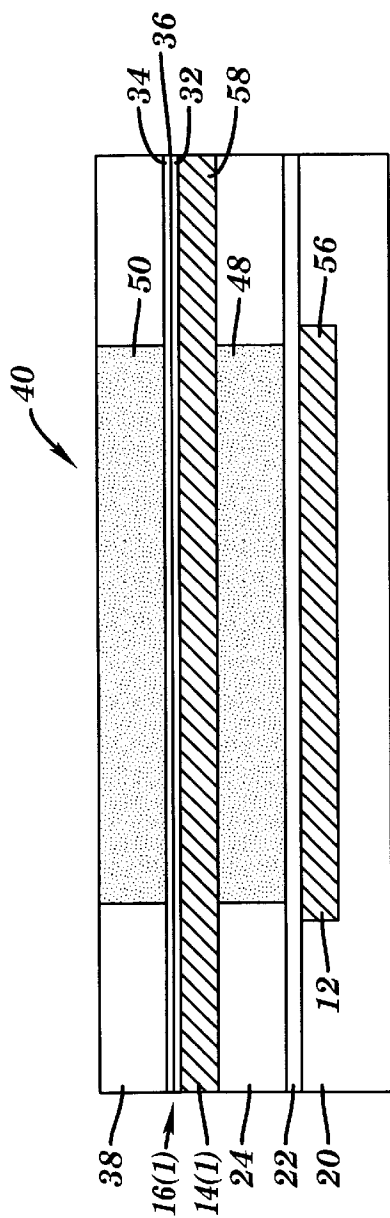


FIG. 12

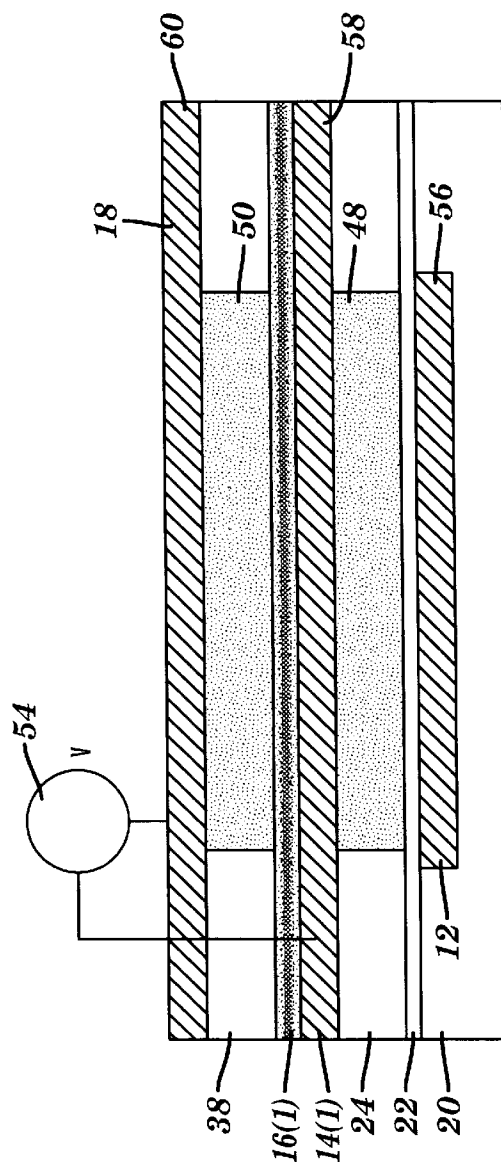


FIG. 13

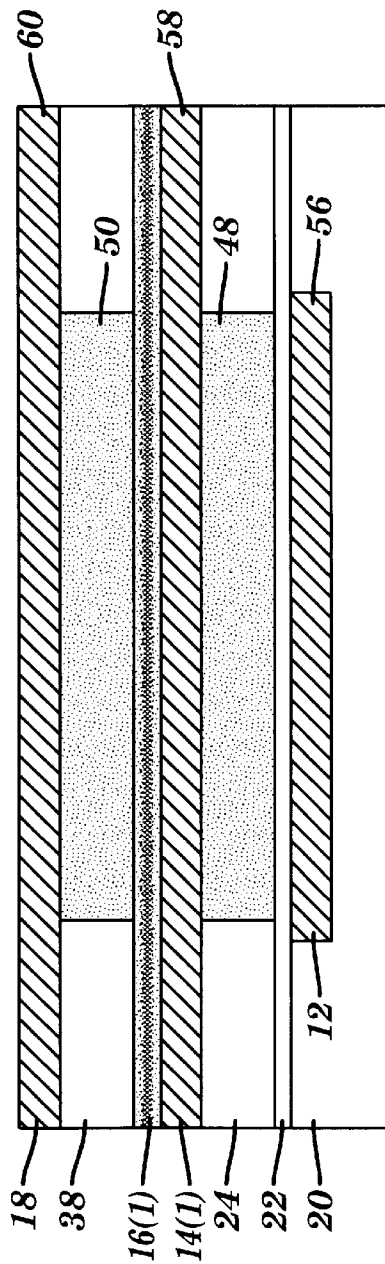


FIG. 14

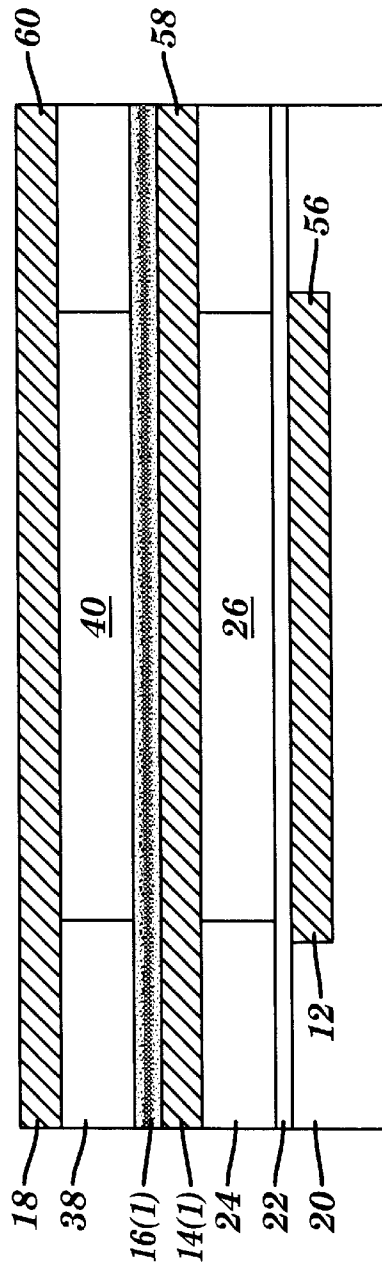


FIG. 15

MICRO-ELECTRO-MECHANICAL VARACTOR AND A METHOD OF MAKING AND USING THEREOF

The present invention claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application Serial No. 60/275,288, filed Mar. 13, 2001, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates generally to micro-electro-mechanical components and, more particularly, to a micro-electro-mechanical (MEMS) varactor and a method of making and using thereof.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A variable capacitor, also known as a varactor, is widely used in many circuit applications. For example, varactors have been used for many years in the radio industry. Previously, these varactors were interdigitated metal leaves with variable overlap area and the dielectric was air.

With the advent of semiconductor devices, p-n junctions were used to form varactors. Since the space charge region of semiconductor p-n junctions varies approximately as the square root of the applied bias, variable capacitance in these varactors is obtained by simply changing the applied bias. However, this leads to the constraint of defining the varactor DC bias dynamically.

Varactors using MEMS technology have been constructed as disclosed at [www.eecs.umich.edu/RADLAB/bio/rebeiz/Current Research.html](http://www.eecs.umich.edu/RADLAB/bio/rebeiz/Current%20Research.html), which is herein incorporated by reference. Unfortunately, these varactors have a capacitance ratio of only on the order of 1.5:1 and 2.5:1. Additionally, these varactors have a fairly large mass which limits their response time.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A varactor in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention includes a first capacitor plate, a second capacitor plate, at least one fixed charge holder, and a control electrode. The second capacitor plate is spaced from and movable towards and away from the first capacitor plate. At least one fixed charge holder with an imbedded charge is on at least a portion of the second capacitor plate. The control electrode is spaced from the second capacitor plate.

A method of using a varactor in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention includes applying a first potential with the first polarity to a control electrode and moving a first capacitor plate towards or away from a second capacitor plate based on the first polarity of the applied first potential.

A method of making a varactor in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention includes providing first and second capacitor plates with the second capacitor plate spaced from and movable towards and away from the first capacitor plate. At least one fixed charge holder is formed on at least a portion of the second capacitor plate. Charge is imbedded in the at least one fixed charge holder. A control electrode is provided that is spaced from the second capacitor plate.

A method for making a varactor in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention includes filling a first trench in a first insulating material with a first conductive material to form a first capacitor plate. A second insulating material is deposited on at least a portion of the

first insulating material. A second trench is formed in a portion of the second insulating material which extends to the first insulating material and is located over at least a portion of the first capacitor plate. The second trench is filled with a first sacrificial material. A second conductive material is deposited over at least a portion of the first sacrificial material and the second insulating material to form a second capacitor plate. A charge holding film is deposited over at least a portion of the second capacitor plate. A third insulating material is deposited over at least a portion of the charge holding film. A third trench is formed in a portion of the third insulating material which extends to the charge holding film. The third trench is filled with a second sacrificial material. A third conductive material is deposited over at least a portion of the second sacrificial material and the third insulating material to form a control electrode. Charge is imbedded in the charge holding film. The first and second sacrificial materials are removed to form a chamber.

The present invention provides a varactor which uses a push-pull technique utilizing fixed static charge. This varactor has a wider dynamic range than prior varactors on the order of at least 4:1. Additionally, the present invention significantly reduces the overall mass of the varactor and increases the force used to modulate a movable capacitor plate compared to prior varactors. As a result, the present invention has a much faster response time than prior MEMS varactors. The present invention can be used in a variety of different applications, such as in wireless communications, global positioning system, and/or cell phones.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a side, cross-sectional view of a varactor in accordance with at least one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is side, cross-sectional views of the varactor shown in FIG. 1 in use to decrease capacitance;

FIG. 3 is a side, cross-sectional views of the varactor shown in FIG. 1 in use to increase capacitance;

FIG. 4 is a side, cross-sectional view of a varactor in accordance with at least one embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGS. 5-15 are side, cross-sectional view of a method of making the varactor shown in FIG. 1 in accordance with at least one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A varactor **10(1)** in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention is illustrated in FIG. 1. The varactor **10(1)** includes a first capacitor plate **12**, a second capacitor plate **14(1)**, at least one fixed charge holder **16(1)**, and a control electrode **18**. The present invention provides a varactor **10(1)** which uses a push-pull techniques utilizing fixed static charge and has a faster response time and wider dynamic range than prior varactors.

Referring more specifically to FIG. 1, the varactor **10(1)** includes a first capacitor plate **12**. In this embodiment, the first capacitor plate **12** is fixed in an insulator **20**, although other configurations can be used. In this embodiment, the first capacitor plate **12** is made of chrome, although another type of conductive material or materials can be used.

An insulator **22** is on a surface the first capacitor plate **12**. The insulator **22** forms part of the dielectric between the first capacitor plate **12** and the second capacitor plate **14(1)**. The insulator **22** also acts as an etch stop layer for etching in insulator **24**. The insulator **22** is made of Si_3N_4 , although

another type of insulating material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. Although an insulator 27 is shown, the insulator 22 could comprise multiple layers of insulating material or could be left out entirely.

Another insulator 24 is on a surface of the insulator 22 and has an opening 26 which extends through the insulator 24 to the insulator 22. The insulator 24 is made of a different material or materials than insulator 22 so that insulator 22 can act as an etch stop. In this embodiment, insulator 24 is made of SiO₂, although another type of insulating material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. The opening 26 in the insulator 24 is a vacuum, although opening could be filled with a gas or gases, such as air.

The second capacitor plate 14(1) is on opposing sides of the opening 26 on the insulator 24, although other arrangements are possible, such as having the second capacitor plate 14(2) secured to the insulator 24 along one edge or end 28 and extending into the opening 26 and with another edge or end 30 spaced from the other side of the insulator 24 as shown in the embodiment in FIG. 4. Referring back to FIG. 1, the second capacitor plate 14(1) is flexible and can move towards or away from the first capacitor plate 12 to change the capacitance of the capacitor in the varactor formed by the first and second capacitor plates 12 and 14(1) separated by the insulator 22 and the space in the opening 26 in the insulator 24. In this embodiment, the second capacitor plate 14(1) is made of aluminum, although another type of conductive material or materials comprising one or more layers can be used.

A fixed or static charge holder 16(1) is connected to a surface of the second capacitor plate 14(1). In this embodiment, the fixed charge holder 16(1) comprises a pair of insulators 32 and 34 which hold imbedded charge at an interface 36 (illustrated more clearly in FIGS. 10-12), although other arrangements for the fixed charge holder 16(1) can be used, such as a single layer of material or multiple layers of a material or materials. In this embodiment, the insulator 32 is made of SiO₂ and the insulator 34 is made of Si₃N₄, although another insulating material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used for insulators 32 and 34.

Another insulator 38 is on a surface of the fixed charge holder 16(1) and has an opening 40 which extends through the insulator 38 to the insulator 34 which forms part of the fixed charge holder 16(1). The opening 40 in the insulator 38 is filled with air, although other types of gases could be in the opening or vacuum. In this embodiment, the insulator 38 is made of SiO₂, although another type of insulating material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

The control electrode 18 is on the insulator 38 over the opening 40, although other arrangements for the control electrode 18 can be used. The control electrode 18 is coupled to a power supply 42 as shown in FIGS. 2 and 3 and applied basis from the power supply 42 is used to control movement of the fixed charge holder 16(1) and thus the second capacitor plate 14(1). In this embodiment, the control electrode 18 is made of aluminum, although another type of conductive material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

An access hole extends through the varactor 10(1) and is sealed with a plug, although other numbers of access holes can be used and the access hole or holes could be located elsewhere on the varactor. The access hole and plug are not illustrated. The sacrificial materials 48 and 50 (shown in FIGS. 12-14) in the openings 26 and 40 in insulators 24 and 38 are removed via the access hole.

The operation of the varactor 10(1) will be described with reference to FIGS. 2 and 3. Referring more specifically to FIG. 2, when the power supply 42 applies a bias on the control electrode 18 that has an opposite polarity as the stored charge on the fixed charge holder 16(1), the fixed charge holder 16(1) is pulled towards the control electrode 18. Pulling the fixed charge holder 16(1) towards the control electrode 18, pulls the second capacitor plate 14(1) connected to the fixed charge holder 16(1) towards the control electrode 18 and away from the first capacitor plate 12 decreasing the capacitance value of the varactor 10(1). As a result, the vacuum or other material, such as a gas, in the opening 26 forms a significant portion of the dielectric between capacitor plates 12 and 14(1).

Referring to FIG. 3, when the power supply 42 applies a bias on the control electrode 18 that has the same polarity as the stored charge on the fixed charge holder 16(1), the fixed charge holder 16(1) is pushed away from the control electrode 18. Pushing the fixed charge holder 16(1) away from the control electrode 18, pushes the second capacitor plate 14(1) connected to the fixed charge holder 16(1) away from the control electrode 18 and towards the first capacitor plate 12 increasing the capacitance value of the varactor 10(1). As a result, insulating layer 22 forms a significant portion of the dielectric between capacitor plates 12 and 14(1). The maximum value for the capacitance of the varactor 10(1) is obtained when a significant portion of the second capacitor plate 14(1) is in direct contact with insulator 22.

Accordingly, the present invention provides a varactor 10(1) with an extended dynamic range over prior MEMS varactors. The ratio of maximum to minimum capacitance in varactor 10(1) is on the order of at least 4:1. Additionally, the present invention significantly reduces the overall mass of the varactor 10(1) and increases the force used to modulate a movable capacitor plate 14(1) compared to prior MEMS varactors. As a result, the present invention also has a much faster response time than prior MEMS varactors.

Referring to FIG. 4, another embodiment of the varactor 10(2) is illustrated. The components and operation of the varactor 10(2) shown in FIG. 4 are identical to those for the varactor shown and described with reference FIG. 1, except as described herein. Components in FIG. 4 which are identical to components in FIG. 1 have the same reference numeral as those in FIG. 1. As discussed earlier in FIG. 4, the second capacitor plate 14(2) is secured to the insulator 24 along one end or edge 28 and extends into the opening and has another edge or end 30 spaced from the other side of the insulator 24. As a result, the second capacitor plate 14(2) is more flexible for movement towards and away from the first capacitor plate 12 depending on the applied bias and thus has a higher dynamic range than the capacitor plate 14(1) shown in the varactor in FIG. 1. The ratio of maximum to minimum capacitance of the varactor 10(2) shown in FIG. 4 is on the order of at least 4:1. The varactor 10(2) also has a fixed charge holder 16(2). In this embodiment, the insulator 52 is made of SiO₂, although another type of insulating material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

A method of making a varactor 10(1) in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention is described with reference to FIGS. 5-15. Referring more specifically to FIG. 5, an opening or trench 54 is formed in either a base insulator 20, although the trench 54 could be formed in other materials, such as in an insulator film on a substrate. In this embodiment, the base insulator 20 is made of silicon dioxide, although another material or materials could be used. The trench 54 is formed by etching, although other techniques for forming the trench 54 could be used.

The trench **54** is filled with a conductive material **56** that forms the first capacitor plate **12**. The conductive material **56** is chrome, although another conductive material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. The conductive material in the trench forms the first capacitor plate **12**. The conductive material can be planarized.

Referring to FIG. 6, once the first capacitor plate **12** is formed, an insulator **22** is deposited on the base insulator **20** and the conductive material **56** and forms part of the dielectric for the varactor **10(1)**. The insulator is Si_3N_4 , although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used, such as SiO_2 ($\epsilon \sim 3.85$), Al_2O_3 ($\epsilon \sim 12$), Ta_2O_5 ($\epsilon \sim 24$). The thickness and permittivity of this insulator **22** will define the maximum capacitance of the varactor **10(1)**.

Referring to FIG. 7, once the insulator **22** that forms part of the dielectric for the varactor **10(1)** is formed, an insulator **24** is deposited on the insulator **22**. Insulator **24** is made of a different material than the insulator **22** so the insulator **22** can act as an etch stop layer. In this embodiment, the insulator **24** is made of SiO_2 , although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. An opening or trench **26** is etched in to the insulator **24** that extends to the insulator **22**. The opening **26** forms part of the dielectric for the varactor **10(1)**. Although opening **26** is formed by etching, other techniques for forming opening **26** can be used.

Referring to FIG. 8, next the opening **26** in the insulator **24** is filled with a sacrificial material **48**, such as poly silicon although another material or materials can be used. The sacrificial material **48** can be planarized.

Referring to FIG. 9, next a conductive material **58** is deposited on the insulator **24** and the sacrificial material **48** to form the second capacitor plate **14(1)**. The conductive material **58** is patterned to an appropriate shape for the second capacitor plate **14(1)**. In this embodiment, the second capacitor plate **14(1)** extends completely across the sacrificial material **48**, although other configurations are possible. For example, the second capacitor plate **14(2)** may extend partially across the sacrificial material **48** with connected at one end or edge **28** connected to the insulator **24** and has another end or edge **30** spaced from the insulator **24** as illustrated in FIG. 4. The second capacitor plate **14(1)** is flexible and is made of aluminum, although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

Referring to FIG. 10, once the second capacitor plate **14(1)** is formed, an insulator **32** is deposited on the second capacitor plate **14(1)** and another insulator **34** is deposited on the insulator to form a fixed charge holder **16(1)** which holds charge at or around an interface **36**. Although insulators **32** and **34** are used to form the fixed charge holder **16(1)**, other numbers of insulators can be used. The insulator **32** is made of SiO_2 and the insulator **34** is made of Si_3N_4 , although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

Referring to FIG. 11, once the fixed charge holder **16(1)** is formed, an insulator **38** is deposited on the insulator. The insulator **38** is made of a different material than the insulator **34** so the insulator **34** can act as an etch stop layer. The insulator **38** is made of SiO_2 , although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. An opening or trench **40** is etched in to the insulator **38** that extends to the insulator **34**. The opening **40** provides room for the second capacitor plate **14(1)** to flex away from the first capacitor plate **12** and towards control electrode **18**. Although opening **40** is formed by etching, other techniques for forming opening **40** can be used.

Referring to FIG. 12, next the opening or trench **40** in insulator **38** is filled with a sacrificial material **50**, such as poly silicon although another material or materials can be used. The sacrificial material **50** can be planarized.

Referring to FIG. 13, next a conductive material **60** is deposited on the insulator **38** and the sacrificial material **50** to form the control electrode **18**. The conductive material **60** is made of aluminum, although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used.

Once the control electrode **18** is formed, a bias from a power supply **54** is applied to the control electrode **18** and the second capacitor plate **14(1)** to imbue charge on the fixed charge holder **16(1)**. The charge is stored at the interface **36** between the insulators **32** and **34**, although the charge can be stored elsewhere depending on the type of fixed charge holder **16(1)**. Once charge is imbedded on the fixed charge holder **16(1)**, the power supply **54** is disconnected from the control electrode **18** and the second capacitor plate **14(1)**. Although one technique for imbedding charge on the fixed charge holder **16(1)** is shown, other techniques can be used, such as injecting charge into the fixed charge holder **16(1)** with a ballistic energy source.

Referring to FIG. 14, once charge is imbedded in the fixed charge holder **16(1)**, an access hole is etched through varactor **10(1)** to provide access to sacrificial materials **48** and **50**. Although one access hole is shown, other numbers of access holes can be formed through other layers to sacrificial materials **48** and **50**. Although access hole is formed by etching, other techniques for forming hole can be used. Holes to contact other components in varactor **10(1)** or **10(2)**, such as first capacitor plate **12**, second capacitor plate **14(1)**, or **14(2)**, and control electrode **18** may also be etched or otherwise formed at this time.

Referring to FIG. 15, once the access hole is formed, the sacrificial materials **48** and **50** are removed via the access hole. In this embodiment, xenon difluoride is used to remove the sacrificial materials **48** and **50**, although another material or materials could be used and other techniques for removing the sacrificial material **48** and **50** could be used.

Referring to FIG. 1, the access hole in varactor **10(1)** filled with the plug. In this embodiment, the plug is made of aluminum, although another material or materials comprising one or more layers could be used. Once the access hole is sealed, the varactor **10(1)** is ready for use. Accordingly, as illustrated by the above discussion, the varactor **10(1)** is easy to manufacture. Further, the resulting varactor has a wider dynamic range and a faster response time than was previously possible with prior varactors. In other embodiments, the capacitor formed between control electrode **18** and second capacitor plate **14(1)** or **14(2)** may also be used, with or without the capacitor formed between first capacitor plate **12** and second capacitor plate **14(1)** or **14(2)**.

Having thus described the basic concept of the invention, it will be rather apparent to those skilled in the art that the foregoing detailed disclosure is intended to be presented by way of example only, and is not limiting. Various alterations, improvements, and modifications will occur and are intended to those skilled in the art, though not expressly stated herein. These alterations, improvements, and modifications are intended to be suggested hereby, and are within the spirit and scope of the invention. Additionally, the recited order of processing elements or sequences, or the use of numbers, letters, or other designations therefor, is not intended to limit the claimed processes to any order except as may be specified in the claims. Accordingly, the invention is limited only by the following claims and equivalents thereto.

What is claimed is:

1. A varactor comprising:

a first capacitor plate;

a second capacitor plate spaced from and movable
towards and away from the first capacitor plate;

at least one fixed charge holder with an imbedded fixed
charge on at least a portion of the second capacitor
plate; and

a control electrode spaced from the second capacitor
plate.

2. The varactor as set forth in claim 1 further comprising
at least one first insulator between and connecting the first
and second capacitor plates, the at least one first insulator
having a first chamber which extends between the first and
second capacitor plates.

3. The varactor as set forth in claim 2 further comprising
at least one second insulator between the second capacitor
plate and the control electrode, the at least one second

insulator having a second chamber which extends between
the second capacitor plate and the control electrode.

4. The varactor as set forth in claim 2 further comprising
at least one dielectric material on the first capacitor plate and
between the first and second capacitor plates.

5. The varactor as set forth in claim 3 wherein the second
capacitor plate is connected at or adjacent at least one end to
the at least one first and second insulators.

6. The varactor as set forth in claim 3 wherein the second
capacitor plate is connected at or adjacent at least opposing
ends to the at least one first and second insulators.

7. The varactor as set forth in claim 1 wherein the at least
one fixed charge holder comprises at least two insulating
layers on at least a portion of the second capacitor plate with
the imbedded fixed charge at an interface between the two
insulating layers.

* * * * *