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Corresponding author(s): Wensheng Cai and Christophe Chipot

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Reporting Summary

Nature Research wishes to improve the reproducibility of the work that we publish. This form provides structure for consistency and transparency in reporting. For further information on Nature Research policies, see our Editorial Policies and the Editorial Policy Checklist.

Statistics

For all statistical analyses, confirm that the following items are present in the figure legend, table legend, main text, or Methods section.

n/a	Confirmed	
☒	☐	The exact sample size (*n*) for each experimental group/condition, given as a discrete number and unit of measurement
☒	☐	A statement on whether measurements were taken from distinct samples or whether the same sample was measured repeatedly
☒	☐	The statistical test(s) used AND whether they are one- or two-sided *Only common tests should be described solely by name; describe more complex techniques in the Methods section.*
☒	☐	A description of all covariates tested
☒	☐	A description of any assumptions or corrections, such as tests of normality and adjustment for multiple comparisons
☒	☐	A full description of the statistical parameters including central tendency (e.g. means) or other basic estimates (e.g. regression coefficient) AND variation (e.g. standard deviation) or associated estimates of uncertainty (e.g. confidence intervals)
☒	☐	For null hypothesis testing, the test statistic (e.g. *F*, *t*, *r*) with confidence intervals, effect sizes, degrees of freedom and *P* value noted *Give P values as exact values whenever suitable.*
☒	☐	For Bayesian analysis, information on the choice of priors and Markov chain Monte Carlo settings
☒	☐	For hierarchical and complex designs, identification of the appropriate level for tests and full reporting of outcomes
☒	☐	Estimates of effect sizes (e.g. Cohen's *d*, Pearson's *r*), indicating how they were calculated

Our web collection on statistics for biologists contains articles on many of the points above.

Software and code

Policy information about availability of computer code

Data collection	The initial structures of protein ligand complexes were taken from Protein Data Bank (https://www.rcsb.org/). Other software required in this study includes VMD 1.9.3 or later (www.ks.uiuc.edu/Research/vmd) and NAMD 3.0 alpha or later (www.ks.uiuc.edu/Research/namd) or Gromacs 2020.4 or later (www.gromacs.org) patched with Colvars (colvars.github.io).
Data analysis	The Python package of BFEE2 can be installed through pip (https://pypi.org/project/BFEE2/) and conda (https://anaconda.org/conda-forge/bfee2). The source code of BFEE2 is available on Github (https://github.com/fhh2626/BFEE2).

For manuscripts utilizing custom algorithms or software that are central to the research but not yet described in published literature, software must be made available to editors and reviewers. We strongly encourage code deposition in a community repository (e.g. GitHub). See the Nature Research guidelines for submitting code & software for further information.

Data

Policy information about availability of data

All manuscripts must include a data availability statement. This statement should provide the following information, where applicable:

- Accession codes, unique identifiers, or web links for publicly available datasets
- A list of figures that have associated raw data
- A description of any restrictions on data availability

The input and output files of BFEE2 of examples are provided in the Supplementary Data. The data shown in Fig. 8-11 were obtained from new simulations, as a way to verify and guarantee the reproducibility of our protocol, albeit some of the illustrations of the manuscript are taken from previous investigations. Input files for these simulations are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

Field-specific reporting

Please select the one below that is the best fit for your research. If you are not sure, read the appropriate sections before making your selection.

☒ Life sciences ☐ Behavioural & social sciences ☐ Ecological, evolutionary & environmental sciences

For a reference copy of the document with all sections, see nature.com/documents/nr-reporting-summary-flat.pdf

Life sciences study design

All studies must disclose on these points even when the disclosure is negative.

Sample size	There is no "sample size" in this protocol. Relatively, simulation time must be sufficiently long to guarantee the convergence of the simulations. How to check the convergence of free-energy calculations is detailed in the manuscript.
Data exclusions	There is no data exclusion.
Replication	All attempts at replication of binding free-energy calculations were successful.
Randomization	There is no data allocation in this protocol.
Blinding	The investigators were blinded to the experimental values before binding free-energy calculations.

Reporting for specific materials, systems and methods

We require information from authors about some types of materials, experimental systems and methods used in many studies. Here, indicate whether each material, system or method listed is relevant to your study. If you are not sure if a list item applies to your research, read the appropriate section before selecting a response.

Materials & experimental systems

n/a	Involved in the study	
☒	☐	Antibodies
☒	☐	Eukaryotic cell lines
☒	☐	Palaeontology and archaeology
☒	☐	Animals and other organisms
☒	☐	Human research participants
☒	☐	Clinical data
☒	☐	Dual use research of concern

Methods

n/a	Involved in the study	
☒	☐	ChIP-seq
☒	☐	Flow cytometry
☒	☐	MRI-based neuroimaging