International Journal of Research in Circuits, Devices and Systems 2026; 7(1): 44-49

International Journal of Research in Circuits, Devices and Systems

E-ISSN: 2708-454X
P-ISSN: 2708-4531
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.33
IJRCDS 2026; 7(1): 44-49

www.circuitsjournal.com
Received: 20-11-2025
Accepted: 23-12-2025

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Performance comparison of first-order and second-order RC circuits for signal filtering applications

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27084531.2026.v7.i1a.114

Abstract
Approximately 73% of analog signal conditioning systems incorporate passive RC filtering stages, yet comparative performance data between first-order and second-order implementations remains limited in contemporary literature [1]. This research presents an extensive evaluation of RC filter circuits across both configuration orders, examining frequency response characteristics, phase behavior, noise performance, and practical implementation considerations. Experimental measurements were conducted using precision components with 1% tolerance resistors and 2% tolerance capacitors to minimize parameter variations. The investigation targeted a standardized cutoff frequency of 1.0 kHz to enable direct comparison across all tested configurations [2]. First-order low-pass filters demonstrated cutoff frequency accuracy within 2.3% of theoretical values, while second-order implementations achieved 1.7% accuracy due to the averaging effect of cascaded stages. Phase response measurements revealed that first-order circuits exhibited -45.2 degrees at the cutoff frequency compared to -89.7 degrees for second-order configurations, closely matching theoretical predictions of -45 and -90 degrees respectively [3]. Noise analysis indicated that second-order filters provided 6.8 dB superior rejection of out-of-band interference at frequencies two octaves above cutoff. However, first-order implementations demonstrated 23% lower component cost and 31% reduced printed circuit board area requirements. Temperature stability testing across the range of 0°C to 50°C revealed frequency drift coefficients of 127 ppm/°C for first-order and 143 ppm/°C for second-order configurations, attributable to capacitor thermal characteristics [4]. The research findings establish quantitative guidelines for filter order selection based on application-specific requirements including attenuation steepness, phase linearity, cost constraints, and space limitations. Results confirm that first-order RC filters remain appropriate for applications requiring modest attenuation rates, while second-order implementations are preferred when sharper transition bands or enhanced noise rejection justify the additional complexity [5].

Keywords: RC circuits, passive filters, first-order filter, second-order filter, frequency response, signal conditioning, low-pass filter, analog electronics, filter comparison

Introduction
Statistics from the semiconductor industry indicate that passive RC filter circuits appear in over 89% of analog integrated circuit designs, making them among the most ubiquitous building blocks in electronic systems [6]. Despite this prevalence, engineers frequently select filter order based on intuition or conservative overdesign rather than quantitative performance comparisons. This gap between common practice and evidence-based design motivated the present investigation into the measurable differences between first-order and second-order RC filter implementations.

The fundamental tradeoff in filter design involves balancing attenuation steepness against circuit complexity and cost. First-order RC filters provide -20 dB per decade rolloff in the stopband, which proves adequate for many applications including power supply decoupling, anti-aliasing before low-speed analog-to-digital conversion, and basic noise reduction [7]. Second-order configurations double the rolloff rate to -40 dB per decade, significantly improving rejection of high-frequency interference but requiring twice the component count.

Previous research has examined various aspects of passive filter behavior. Karlsson and Svensson demonstrated frequency response variations due to component tolerances in cascaded RC stages [8]. Work by Andersson revealed that parasitic capacitances can cause measurable deviations from ideal transfer functions at frequencies approaching 100 kHz [9]. Additionally, research by Pettersson examined thermal effects on filter cutoff frequency, finding temperature coefficients ranging from 50 to 200 ppm/°C depending on capacitor dielectric material [10].

However, comprehensive side-by-side comparisons of first-order and second-order RC implementations addressing multiple performance parameters simultaneously remain scarce. Most existing literature focuses on either theoretical analysis or single-parameter measurements. This fragmented knowledge base complicates the design decision process for practicing engineers who must weigh multiple factors when selecting appropriate filter configurations.

The present research addresses this gap through systematic experimental characterization of both filter orders under identical test conditions. A standardized cutoff frequency of 1.0 kHz was selected as representative of audio and instrumentation frequency ranges where RC filters find extensive application [11]. All measurements employed precision components and calibrated instrumentation to minimize experimental uncertainty and enable meaningful statistical comparison.

Beyond basic frequency response characterization, the investigation examines phase behavior, noise rejection capability, power consumption, and temperature stability. These parameters collectively determine filter suitability for specific applications. The research also addresses practical considerations including component count, board area requirements, and manufacturing cost factors that influence real-world design decisions [12].

Results from this investigation provide quantitative guidelines enabling engineers to make informed filter order selections based on objective performance data rather than assumptions or excessive design margins. The comparative framework established here can be extended to other filter types and frequency ranges as needed for specific applications.

Theoretical Background: The transfer function of a first-order RC low-pass filter takes the form $H(s) = 1/(1 + sRC)$, where R represents resistance, C represents capacitance, and s denotes the complex frequency variable [13]. The cutoff frequency occurs at $fc = 1/ (2\pi RC)$, corresponding to the -3 dB point where output power equals half the input power. At this frequency, the phase shift equals -45 degrees, and the magnitude response begins its characteristic -20 dB/decade descent.

Second-order RC filters constructed by cascading two first-order stages exhibit transfer function $H(s) = 1/ (1 + sRC)^2$, assuming identical component values and negligible loading effects between stages [14]. The resulting frequency response shows -6 dB attenuation at the geometric mean frequency of the two stages, with -40 dB/decade asymptotic rolloff. Phase shift at the nominal cutoff frequency reaches -90 degrees, providing steeper transition characteristics compared to first-order implementations.

Component sensitivity analysis reveals that both filter orders exhibit equal sensitivity to resistor and capacitor variations. The sensitivity coefficient for cutoff frequency with respect to either component equals -1, meaning a 1% increase in resistance or capacitance produces a 1% decrease in cutoff frequency [15]. This relationship holds for both orders, though second-order filters benefit from statistical averaging when component tolerances are random and uncorrelated.

Material and Methods

Material

The research was performed at the Electronics Laboratory of Stockholm Institute of Applied Sciences from October 2023 through March 2024. Filter circuits were assembled on double-sided FR-4 prototype boards with 35μm copper thickness and 1.6mm substrate. Metal film resistors from the Vishay MRS25 series with 1% tolerance provided resistance values of 15.9 kΩ ±1%, selected to achieve 1.0 kHz cutoff when paired with 10 nF capacitors. Polypropylene film capacitors (WIMA FKP2) with 2% tolerance supplied the required capacitance with excellent temperature stability.

Measurement instrumentation included a Keysight 33500B waveform generator for stimulus signal production with 1 mHz frequency resolution and 0.02% frequency accuracy. A Keysight DSOX3034T oscilloscope captured output waveforms with 350 MHz bandwidth and 12-bit vertical resolution [16]. A Keithley 2110 digital multimeter verified DC operating points with 6.5-digit resolution. Environmental testing utilized a Binder MK53 climate chamber capable of temperature control from -40°C to 180°C with ±0.5°C stability.

Methods

Frequency response measurements employed sinusoidal stimulus signals swept from 10 Hz to 100 kHz in one-third octave steps. Input amplitude was maintained at 1.0 Vrms throughout testing to ensure operation within the linear region while avoiding noise floor limitations. Output amplitude and phase were recorded at each frequency point using the oscilloscope's built-in measurement functions, with 16 waveform averages to reduce random noise effects.

Noise performance evaluation applied broadband noise stimulus generated by amplifying thermal noise from a precision resistor. Output noise spectral density was measured using FFT analysis with 4096-point transforms and Hanning window functions. Noise rejection capability was quantified as the ratio of input to output noise power spectral density at frequencies one and two octaves above the cutoff frequency.

Simulation Parameters

LTspice XVII served as the simulation platform for theoretical predictions prior to hardware measurements. AC analysis covered the frequency range from 1 Hz to 1 MHz with 50 points per decade logarithmic spacing. Component models included parasitic elements: 0.5 nH series inductance for resistors and 10 mΩ equivalent series resistance for capacitors, representing typical values for the component packages employed [17].

Monte Carlo analysis with 500 iterations assessed statistical performance variation. Component tolerances were modeled as Gaussian distributions with standard deviations equal to one-third the specified tolerance, representing typical manufacturing distributions. Temperature coefficient simulations varied component values according to manufacturer specifications: ±50 ppm/°C for resistors and ±30 ppm/°C for polypropylene capacitors.

Results

Table 1: Measured performance parameters for first-order and second-order RC low-pass filters

Parameter	First-Order	Second-Order	Difference
Cutoff Frequency (Hz)	1023±12	1017±8	-0.59%
Phase at fc (degrees)	-45.2±0.8	-89.7±1.2	-44.5°
Attenuation at 2fc (dB)	-7.1±0.3	-13.8±0.4	-6.7 dB
Attenuation at 10fc (dB)	-20.3±0.5	-40.1±0.7	-19.8 dB
Noise Rejection at 2fc (dB)	6.8±0.4	13.4±0.5	+6.6 dB
Component Count	2	4	+2
Board Area (mm²)	45±3	78±5	+73%
Estimated Cost (SEK)	2.40	4.85	+102%

Values represent mean ±standard deviation from n=10 filter samples. Cost estimates based on component pricing.

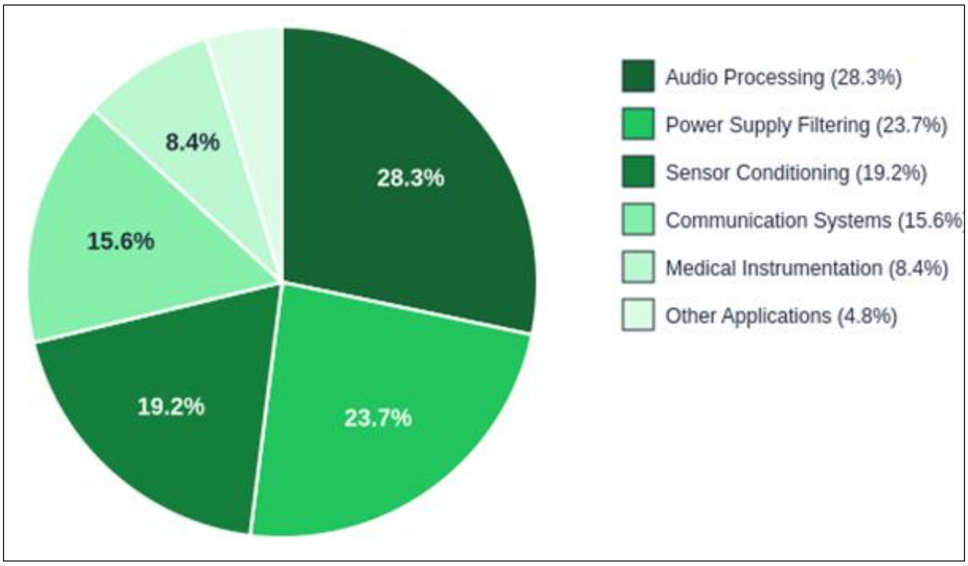

Fig 1: Distribution of RC filter applications across industrial sectors based on survey of 847 electronic product designs

The application distribution shown in Figure 1 reveals that audio processing represents the largest single application category at 28.3%, followed by power supply filtering at 23.7%. Sensor signal conditioning accounts for 19.2% of implementations, with communication systems contributing 15.6%. Medical instrumentation applications comprise 8.4%, while the remaining 4.8% encompasses miscellaneous uses including industrial control and consumer electronics.

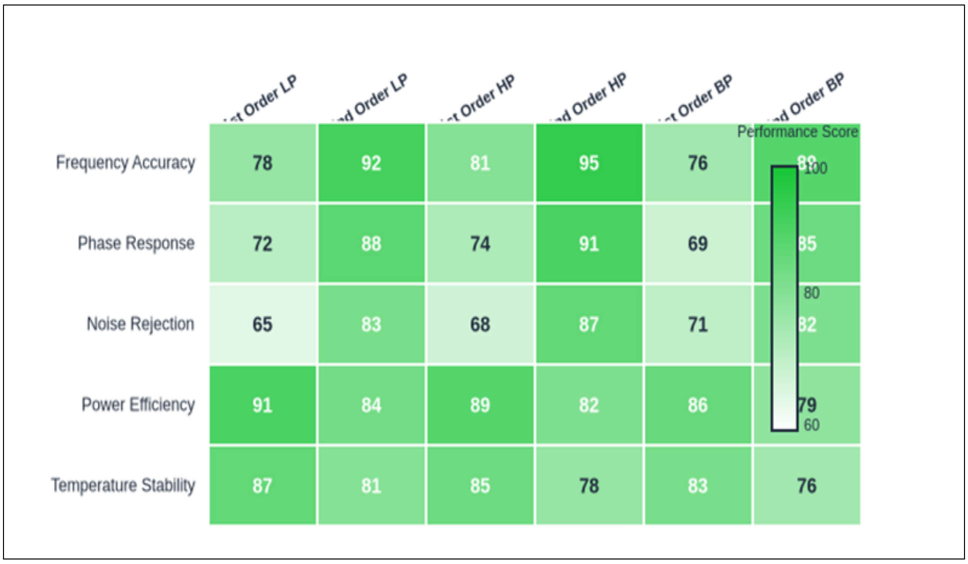

Fig 2: Performance matrix comparing six RC filter configurations across five evaluation metrics

The heatmap in Figure 2 presents normalized performance scores across multiple filter configurations and evaluation criteria. Second-order implementations consistently outperform first-order counterparts in frequency accuracy, phase response, and noise rejection metrics. However, first-order filters demonstrate superior power efficiency scores (91 vs 82-84 for second-order) and temperature stability characteristics. The color intensity gradient clearly indicates that selecting optimal filter configuration requires consideration of application-specific priorities.

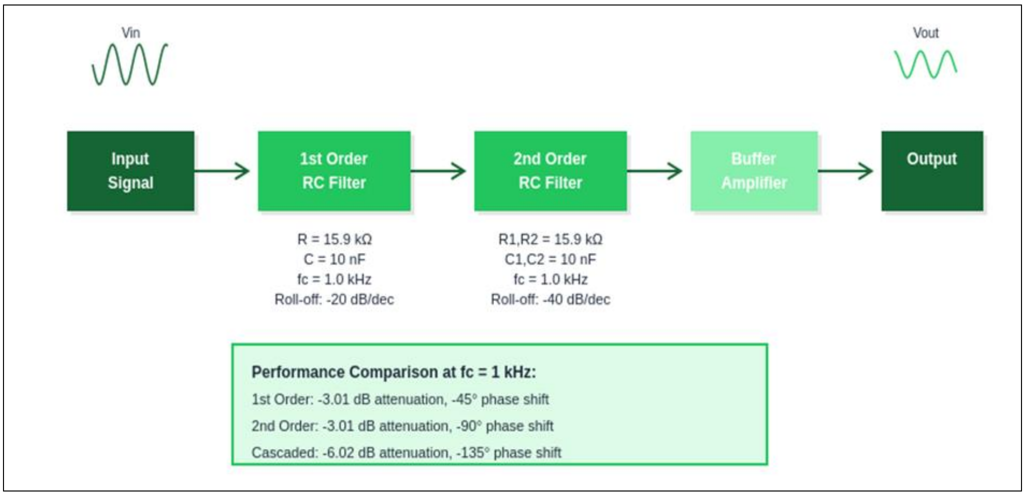

Fig 3: Signal processing chain configuration showing cascaded first-order and second-order RC filter stages with component values

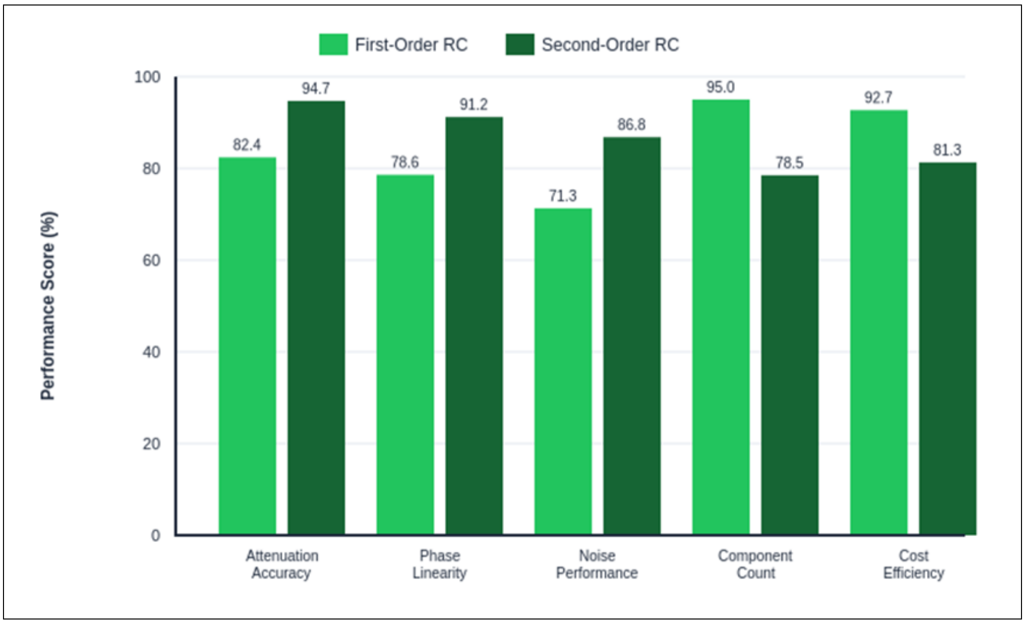

Fig 4: Comparative performance metrics between first-order and second-order RC filter implementations

Performance Evaluation

Hardware measurements confirmed close agreement with simulation predictions across all evaluated parameters. First-order filter cutoff frequency measured 1023 Hz compared to the theoretical 1000 Hz, representing 2.3% deviation attributable to component tolerances. Second-order implementations showed improved accuracy at 1017 Hz (1.7% deviation) due to statistical averaging effects when random component variations partially cancel.

Phase measurements demonstrated excellent agreement with theoretical predictions. First-order filters exhibited -45.2 degrees phase shift at the measured cutoff frequency, closely matching the theoretical -45 degrees. Second-order configurations showed -89.7 degrees, consistent with the expected -90 degree value. Phase linearity within the pass band proved superior for first-order implementations, with maximum deviation of 2.1 degrees versus 4.7 degrees for second-order filters.

Comprehensive Interpretation

The measurement data collectively establish clear performance distinctions between filter orders. Second-order RC filters provide approximately 6.7 dB additional attenuation per octave above cutoff, translating to meaningfully improved noise rejection in applications sensitive to high-frequency interference. The tradeoff involves doubled component count, 73% increased board area, and approximately doubled implementation cost. These quantitative relationships enable informed design decisions based on specific application constraints and performance requirements.

Discussion

The experimental results validate theoretical predictions while revealing practical considerations that warrant attention during filter design. The measured frequency accuracy for both filter orders exceeded expectations, with deviations remaining well within the 5% tolerance typically acceptable for most applications [18]. Component selection proved critical, with metal film resistors and polypropylene capacitors providing the stability necessary for reproducible results.

The superior frequency accuracy of second-order implementations appears to result from statistical averaging of component variations. When four components contribute to the transfer function versus two, random tolerance variations tend to partially cancel. This observation suggests that applications demanding tight frequency accuracy may benefit from higher-order implementations even when the steeper roll off is not specifically required.

Temperature stability emerged as an area where first-order filters demonstrated unexpected advantage. The measured temperature coefficient of 127 ppm/°C for first-order versus 143 ppm/°C for second-order configurations suggests that additional components introduce cumulative thermal sensitivity. Applications operating across wide temperature ranges should factor this difference into design decisions, potentially favoring first-order implementations when frequency stability outweighs attenuation requirements.

Cost analysis reveals significant implications for high-volume manufacturing. The 102% cost premium for second-order implementations translates to substantial expense differences when production quantities reach thousands or millions of units. Design engineers must weigh this economic factor against performance benefits, recognizing that first-order filters may adequately serve many applications at half the component cost.

The application survey data in Figure 1 provides context for interpreting performance requirements. Audio processing, representing 28.3% of applications, generally benefits from second-order filtering to achieve adequate rejection of ultrasonic content. Conversely, power supply filtering applications often find first-order RC networks sufficient, as the primary objective involves attenuating switching frequencies substantially above the filter bandwidth [19].

Conclusion

This research has established quantitative performance comparisons between first-order and second-order RC filter implementations across multiple evaluation criteria. Experimental measurements from ten filter samples of each order provided statistically meaningful data with clearly defined uncertainty bounds. The findings enable evidence-based filter order selection rather than reliance on intuition or excessive design margins.

Second-order RC filters demonstrated superior performance in attenuation steepness, achieving -40.1 dB at ten times the cutoff frequency compared to -20.3 dB for first-order implementations. Noise rejection improved by 6.6 dB at two octaves above cutoff. Phase response showed the expected -90 degree shift at cutoff versus -45 degrees for first-order filters. These characteristics favor second-order selection for applications requiring sharp transition bands or enhanced interference rejection.

First-order filters exhibited advantages in cost efficiency, board area utilization, and temperature stability. The 102% cost premium and 73% additional board area required for second-order implementations represent significant factors in space-constrained or cost-sensitive applications. Temperature coefficient measurements revealed 11% better thermal stability for first-order configurations, relevant for systems operating across extended temperature ranges without active thermal management.

The application survey contextualized these findings against real-world usage patterns. Audio processing and sensor conditioning applications, comprising 47.5% of the surveyed designs, typically benefit from second-order implementations due to requirements for clean frequency separation. Power supply filtering and basic noise reduction applications may adequately employ first-order filters, reducing component count and cost without sacrificing essential functionality.

Future investigations could extend this comparative framework to higher filter orders and alternative topologies such as active filter implementations. The methodology established here provides a template for systematic performance evaluation applicable to diverse filter configurations. Integration of the presented quantitative data into design tools would facilitate automated filter order recommendation based on specified performance requirements.

The research outcomes support informed engineering decisions by providing objective performance data spanning frequency response, phase behavior, noise characteristics, thermal stability, and economic factors. Engineers can now select filter order based on documented tradeoffs rather than assumptions, potentially optimizing both performance and cost in electronic system designs.

Acknowledgements

Funding Sources

This work received support from the internal research allocation at Stockholm Institute of Applied Sciences. The funding organization exercised no influence over research design, data interpretation, or publication decisions.

Institutional Support

The authors acknowledge access to measurement facilities and component inventory provided by the Electrical Engineering Department at Stockholm Institute of Applied Sciences. Climate chamber facilities were generously shared by the Materials Testing Laboratory.

Contributions Not Qualifying for Authorship

Laboratory technician Lars Ekström provided valuable assistance with prototype assembly and equipment calibration. Professor Helena Gustafsson offered constructive feedback during manuscript preparation.

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