

# Analysis of Improved Howland Current Pump Configurations



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## ABSTRACT

The Improved Howland current pump is a circuit that uses a difference amplifier to impose a voltage across a shunt resistor, creating a voltage-controlled current source capable of driving a wide range of load resistances. This versatility of this design can be useful in many applications that require a current source capable of bipolar (source or sink) operation. Part of the versatility is the ability to make small alterations to the design that improves the overall performance of the circuit. This article analyzes a few Improved Howland current pump configurations and provides recommendations on how to enhance performance.

A common goal of these designs is to create a high-output impedance current source that can source or sink approximately 25 mA of current while employing the Improved Howland current pump topology. Analysis is done on four different configurations and some benefits and disadvantages of each configuration is discussed. Depending on design requirements, one configuration can be more appropriate than another for a specific application. Take precautions when driving reactive loads in an Improved Howland current pump circuit. Additionally, some loads can cause the circuit to become unstable due to insufficient phase margin. Only resistive loads are discussed in this article.

## Table of Contents

1 Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump – Design 1.....	2
2 Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer – Design 2.....	4
3 Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3.....	6
4 Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Settable Gain – Design 4.....	7
5 Design Needs and Considerations.....	8
6 Operational Amplifier Considerations.....	9
7 References.....	9
8 Revision History.....	9

## List of Figures

Figure 1-1. Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump.....	2
Figure 1-2. Ideal 10-mA Improved Howland Current Pump.....	2
Figure 2-1. Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer.....	4
Figure 2-2. Ideal 10-mA Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer.....	5
Figure 3-1. Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump With INA592 and Buffer.....	6
Figure 4-1. Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump With INA592 and Settable Gain.....	7

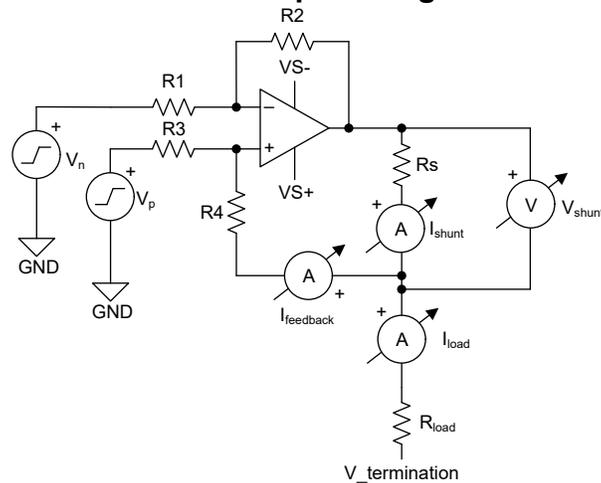
## List of Tables

Table 5-1. Comparison Table for Designs 1-4.....	8
Table 6-1. Operational Amplifier Considerations.....	9
Table 6-2. Integrated Difference Amplifier Considerations.....	9

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## 1 Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump – Design 1



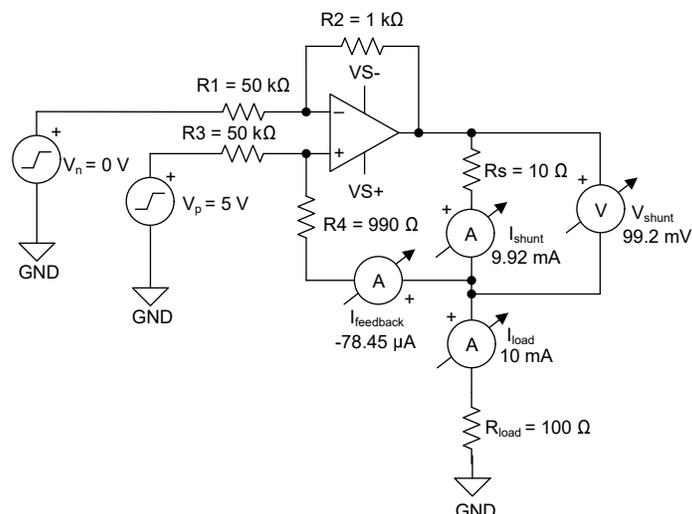
**Figure 1-1. Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump**

Figure 1-1 shows the basic configuration of the Improved Howland current pump that uses one operational amplifier, five discrete resistors and a resistive load,  $R_{load}$ . The current through the load ( $I_{load}$ ) can be calculated using Equation 1.

$$I_{load} (A) = \frac{G \times (V_p - V_n)}{R_s} \quad (1)$$

$$G(V/V) = \frac{R_2}{R_1}, \quad \frac{R_2}{R_1} = \frac{R_4 + R_s}{R_3} \quad (2)$$

In an ideal Improved Howland current pump; resistor  $R_4$  is sometimes set to equal  $R_2 - R_s$ , which produces the expected current value by slightly altering the feedback in the positive loop. This design has limited practicality considering the standard resistor values to choose from, as well as their tolerances. More details on the functionality of the ideal Improved Howland current pump design can be found in the link provided in the [References](#) section. Figure 1-2 shows an example of *Design 1* and the results with a modified  $R_4$  resistor. The circuit is designed for a 10-mA output current with an input voltage difference of 5 V using ideal components.



**Figure 1-2. Ideal 10-mA Improved Howland Current Pump**

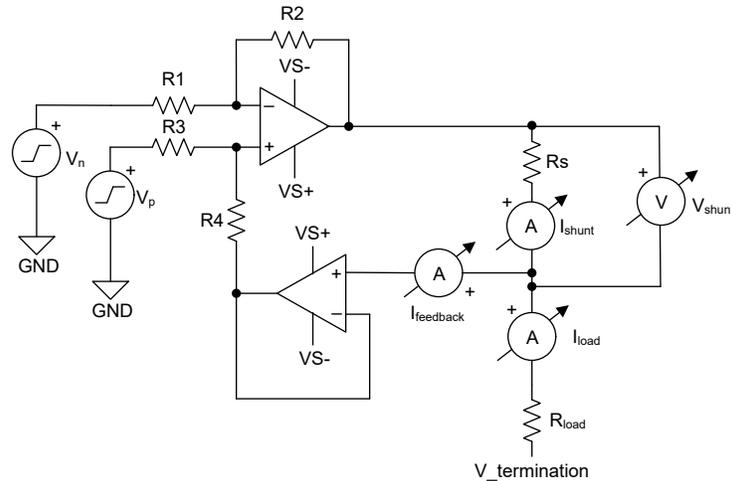
**Benefits:** One benefit of this configuration is the freedom to choose the gain value ( $G$ ), and ultimately design for output headroom (the maximum output voltage swing or compliance range), by varying the  $V_{\text{shunt}}$  voltage. That is the case because all the resistors are discretely selected for the circuit. Another benefit is the ability to select an op amp which fits the specific design requirements of the application such as size, power, and supply voltage. One last benefit for this design is that only one op amp is required.

**Disadvantages:** One disadvantage of this configuration is an error that is caused by the  $I_{\text{feedback}}$  current affecting the  $I_{\text{load}}$  current. An ideal current source has infinite output impedance; however, the finite output impedance of this configuration is determined by the two feedback resistors in series ( $R_3+R_4$ ). This can lead to significant error in  $I_{\text{load}}$  that is more apparent when the design does not use the modified  $R_4$  resistor.

To minimize error caused by  $I_{\text{feedback}}$ , choosing higher value resistors for the feedback paths increases the output impedance of the current source. This comes at the expense of more thermal noise due to larger resistor values. Possible bandwidth limitations and stability issues caused by large resistances and parasitic capacitances in the circuit also become more prevalent. To learn more about noise and stability, TI Precision Lab video links are found in the [References](#) section.

Another disadvantage with this configuration comes from the discretely chosen resistors in the feedback network. Discrete builds with 0.1% tolerance resistors can have a worst-case CMRR value of around 60 dB, which can be too low for precision applications. More information on the importance of matching resistors is found in the link provided in the [References](#) section. This resistor mismatch also creates gain error in the design, which contributes to the overall error. One final consideration for a discrete version of this configuration is the PC board space required considering external resistors are being used for the difference amplifier.

## 2 Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer – Design 2



**Figure 2-1. Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer**

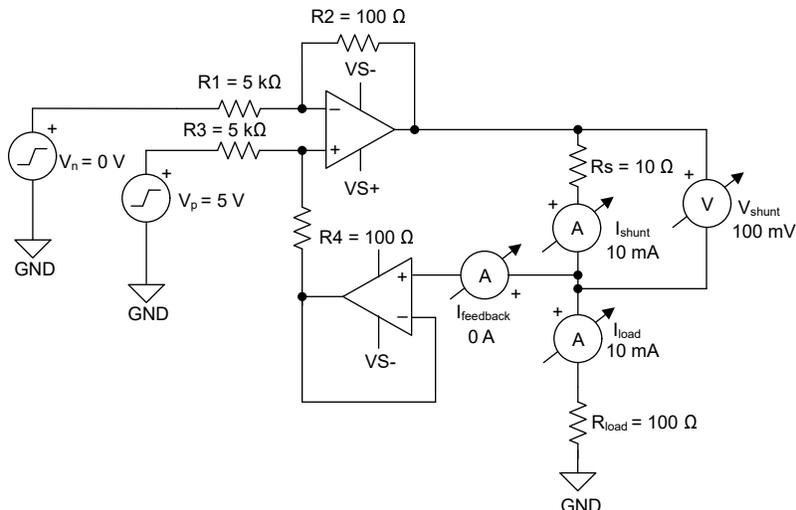
Figure 2-1 shows a similar configuration of an Improved Howland current pump that uses two op amps. The buffer has high input impedance, which introduces high output impedance into the current source. Note when the buffer is added, the circuit designer should no longer modify R4 by the value of Rs.  $I_{load}$  can now be calculated using Equation 3 provided below:

$$I_{load} (A) = \frac{G \times (V_p - V_n)}{R_s} \quad (3)$$

$$G(V/V) = \frac{R_2}{R_1}, \quad (R_1 = R_3, R_2 = R_4) \quad (4)$$

**Benefits:** This configuration has the same benefits as the non-buffered configuration shown in [Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump – Design 1](#); however, it has the added benefit of minimizing error by practically eliminating  $I_{feedback}$  current due to the added buffer. The second op amp therefore results in the ability to choose lower value resistors for the feedback network. This allows the circuit designer to minimize thermal noise attributed to high value resistors and also minimizes any stability and bandwidth concerns in the circuit.

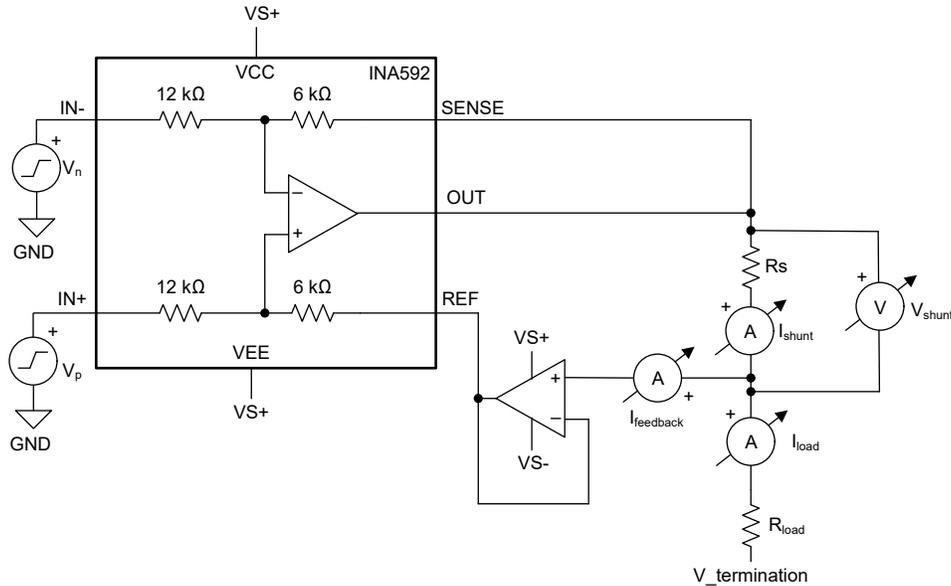
Figure 2-2 shows the same 10-mA current source; the buffer practically eliminates  $I_{\text{feedback}}$  current.



**Figure 2-2. Ideal 10-mA Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer**

**Disadvantages:** A similar disadvantage to the one op amp design comes from the mismatched discrete resistors. The overall size of the circuit increases with the addition of a second op amp which can be a disadvantage for designs that are limited in space. Fortunately, many precision op amps are available in dual configurations, which hardly add to the size or cost of the circuit.

### 3 Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3



**Figure 3-1. Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump With INA592 and Buffer**

Figure 3-1 shows a more integrated version of the [Discrete Improved Howland Current Pump With Buffer – Design 2](#) that integrates the difference amplifier configuration into one package. For a design target of up to  $\pm 25$  mA, the [INA592](#) can be a great selection for an integrated design. The performance of this device is attributed to the core [OPA192](#) precision op amp and precision matched thin-film resistors all integrated into one die. Load current can accurately be represented by [Equation 3](#); however  $G$  is fixed to  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $2$  (V/V) due to the integrated resistors. Improved Howland current pump circuits often use a voltage gain of less than 1 (V/V) so the gain of  $\frac{1}{2}$  (V/V) is more likely to be of use.

**Benefits:** The benefit of using [Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3](#) is that it minimizes many of the sources of error seen in the discrete designs. The buffer creates high output impedance practically eliminating  $I_{\text{feedback}}$  current. The integrated resistors nearly eliminate the error previously caused by mismatched resistors. As a result, this device has a typical CMRR value of 100 dB as well as a typical gain error of 0.01%, sufficient for use in high precision applications. Buying discrete precision matched resistors at this performance level would be a significant expense. Considering the [INA592](#) is priced similarly to other high performance op amps that do not include the four high precision resistors, the discrete resistors alone can easily end up costing much more than the [INA592](#) itself.

The 12-k $\Omega$  and 6-k $\Omega$  integrated resistors also keep thermal noise relatively low. This also minimizes possible bandwidth limitations and stability issues. Another benefit of the integrated design is the size of the circuit. The [INA592](#) is offered in a 3-mm  $\times$  3-mm VSSOP package, which is significantly smaller than most discrete op amps paired with four discrete resistors.

For precision applications it is easy to see the benefit of using an integrated configuration such as the [INA592](#). For less precise applications or where sufficient calibration is performed, a less precise op amp and higher tolerance external resistors may fit the performance specifications required.

**Disadvantages:** Due to integrated resistors, the gain value is fixed for this integrated difference amplifier. In the case of the [INA592](#), the gain value is  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $2$  (V/V). The current through the load can be varied by changing  $R_s$ ; however the fixed gains limit the range of values  $V_{\text{shunt}}$  can have for the same input voltage difference. This can result in limitations in circuits with low supply voltages or large load resistors due to limited output headroom in the design.

## 4 Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Settable Gain – Design 4

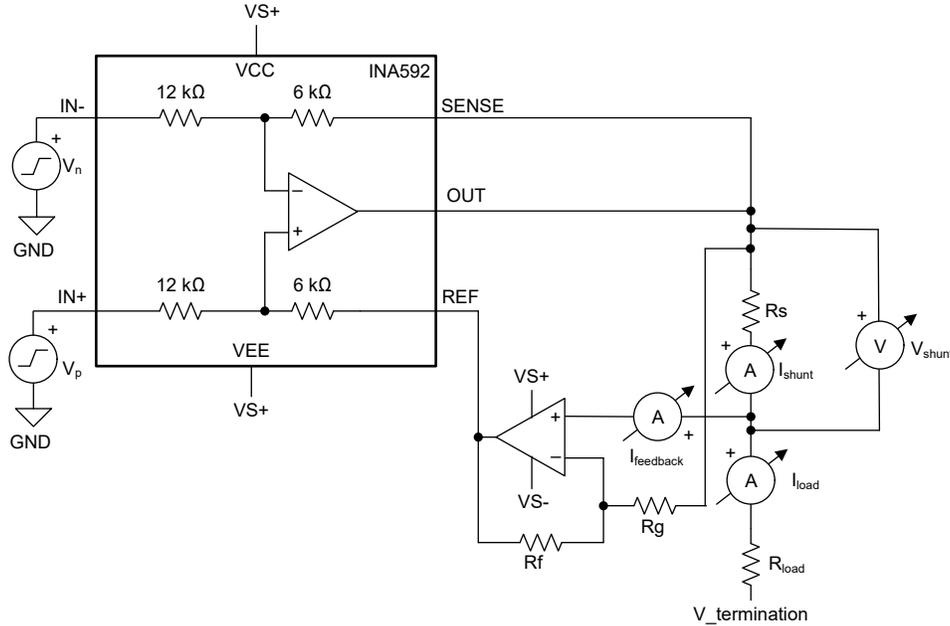


Figure 4-1. Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump With INA592 and Settable Gain

Figure 4-1 shows the same integrated design of an Improved Howland current pump as [Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3](#); the only difference being that the feedback op amp has a settable gain compared to the unity gain of the buffer configuration. This gain configuration gives the ability to design for different values of  $V_{shunt}$  for the same input voltage difference, which was limited with [Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3](#).  $I_{load}$  can now be calculated using [Equation 5](#).

$$I_{load} (A) = \frac{G \times (V_p - V_n)}{R_s \times \left(1 + \frac{R_f}{R_g}\right)} \quad (5)$$

$$G(V/V) = \frac{1}{2} \text{ or } 2 \quad (6)$$

**Benefits:** The benefits to this configuration are the same as in [Integrated Improved Howland Current Pump - INA592 and Buffer – Design 3](#); with the added benefit of being able to vary the  $V_{shunt}$  voltage as discussed above. Having the ability to adjust the voltage across the shunt resistor allows the circuit designer more freedom to set the output headroom of the circuit while still benefiting from the precision and high performance of the INA592.

**Disadvantages:** One disadvantage with this configuration could be the size of the circuit since two op amps and two external resistors are used in the design. This also leads to a slightly more complicated design than the previous three configurations. Due to non-ideal external resistors ( $R_f$ ,  $R_g$ ), gain error can be expected, which affects the current accuracy of the circuit.

## 5 Design Needs and Considerations

The need for a simple voltage-controlled current source can be readily met by implementing the Improved Howland current pump topology and due to the versatility, there are many options to choose from as discussed previously. When designing for a specific application there are many parameters to consider. With all four configurations, non-ideal characteristics of any op amp and resistor are an inherent source of error in the design. One non-ideal characteristic of an op amp to consider is the offset voltage. The effect this non-ideal characteristic has on the final performance of the Improved Howland current pump circuit can be significant. Using precision op amps with very low offset voltage ( $< 100 \mu\text{V}$ ) considerably reduces the error the circuit contributes. The offset voltage information is included in the *electrical characteristics* table of the op amp data sheet.

Another non-ideal characteristic of an op amp to consider is the output voltage swing limitations as the output current changes. When considering output headroom performance, refer to the typical values given in the *Output Voltage Swing vs. Output Current* graphs in the data sheet of the op amp. Doing so allows one to account for the output swing limitations. Similar considerations must be taken to make sure the common-mode input voltage range of the op amp is not violated. For designs 2 through 4, account for input and output swing limitations for both op amps. These input and output limitations contribute to the overall voltage compliance of the current source.

As mentioned throughout the article, each design has disadvantages and depending on the specific design goals, one design can be more desirable for an application than another design. Considering parameters such as the supply voltage of the amplifier, output impedance, thermal noise due to resistors, and the op amps, the amount of freedom to design for output headroom, and overall accuracy are a good start when narrowing down which design to use.

Use [Table 5-1](#) as a starting place when choosing which design and the level of precision of op amps to implement. In some cases implementing a general purpose op amp, such as the [OPA310](#), [OPA2310](#), [OPA990](#), or [OPA2990](#), is enough for specific design goals compared to more precise op amps like the [OPA192](#) or [OPA2192](#).

**Table 5-1. Comparison Table for Designs 1-4**

Design	Amplifiers	Device Supply Voltage	Output Impedance	Thermal Noise	Designing for Headroom	Accuracy
1.A	<a href="#">OPA310</a> Op Amp	1.5 V to 5.5 V	R3+R4	Varies	Best	Good
1.B	<a href="#">OPA990</a> Op Amp	2.7 V to 40 V	R3+R4	Varies	Best	Good
1.C	<a href="#">OPA192</a> Op Amp	4.5 V to 36 V	R3+R4	Varies	Best	Better
2.A	<a href="#">OPA2310</a> Op Amp	1.5 V to 5.5 V	High	Moderate	Best	Better
2.B	<a href="#">OPA2990</a> Op Amp	2.7 V to 40 V	High	Moderate	Best	Better
2.C	<a href="#">OPA2192</a> Op Amp	4.5 V to 36 V	High	Low	Best	Better
3.A	<a href="#">INA592</a> with <a href="#">OPA990</a> Buffer	4.5 V to 36 V	High	Moderate	Good	Best
3.B	<a href="#">INA592</a> with <a href="#">OPA192</a> Buffer	4.5 V to 36 V	High	Low	Good	Best
4.A	<a href="#">INA592</a> with <a href="#">OPA990</a> Feedback Op Amp	4.5 V to 36 V	High	Moderate	Best	Better
4.B	<a href="#">INA592</a> with <a href="#">OPA192</a> Feedback Op Amp	4.5 V to 36 V	High	Low	Best	Best

When narrowing down which configuration to use, consider the error, cost, and size budgets of the system. Additionally, consider design specifications such as the current required through the load, output headroom, and voltage constraints for a specific design.

## 6 Operational Amplifier Considerations

Table 6-1 lists the operational amplifier considerations. Table 6-2 details the integrated difference amplifier considerations.

**Table 6-1. Operational Amplifier Considerations**

Part Number	Specifications
<a href="#">OPA310</a> High Output Current Op Amp (1.5 V to 5.5 V)	Rail-to-rail input and output (RRIO), $\pm 150$ -mA output short circuit current at 5.5 V, $\pm 250$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 1.3$ -mV max), low 16 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz
<a href="#">OPA192</a> Precision Op Amp	RRIO, low $\pm 5$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 25$ - $\mu$ V max), low 5.5 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz
<a href="#">OPA191</a> Precision Low-Power Op Amp	RRIO, low $\pm 5$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 25$ - $\mu$ V max), low 15 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz
<a href="#">OPA197</a> Precision Op Amp (for cost-optimized designs)	RRIO, low $\pm 25$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 100$ - $\mu$ V max), low 5.5 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz
<a href="#">OPA196</a> Precision Low-Power Op Amp (for cost-optimized designs)	RRIO, low $\pm 25$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 100$ - $\mu$ V max), low 15 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz
<a href="#">OPA990</a> General Purpose Op Amp	RRIO, $\pm 300$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 1.5$ -mV max), low 30 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz

**Table 6-2. Integrated Difference Amplifier Considerations**

Part Number	Specifications
<a href="#">INA592</a> Precision Op Amp	RRIO, low $\pm 14$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 40$ - $\mu$ V max), low 18 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz (G = $\frac{1}{2}$ )
<a href="#">INA597</a> Precision Op Amp (for cost optimized designs)	RRIO, low $\pm 14$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 200$ - $\mu$ V max), low 18 nV / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz (G = $\frac{1}{2}$ )
<a href="#">INA1620</a> Op Amp with integrated precision resistors	$\pm 100$ - $\mu$ V offset ( $\pm 1$ -mV max), Ultra-low 2.8 / $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ noise at 1 kHz

## 7 References

- Texas Instruments, [AN-1515 A Comprehensive Study of the Howland Current Pump](#)
- Texas Instruments, [Parallel Amplifiers for Higher Output Power: An Improved Howland Pump Approach](#)
- Texas Instruments, TI Precision Labs Noise Video: [8-1 TI Precision Labs - Op Amps: Noise - Spectral Density](#)
- Texas Instruments, TI Precision Labs Stability Video: [10.1 TI Precision Labs - Op Amps: Stability - Introduction](#)
- Texas Instruments, Importance of Matching Difference Amplifier Resistors: [Difference Amplifiers – the Need for Well-Matched Resistors](#)

## 8 Revision History

NOTE: Page numbers for previous revisions may differ from page numbers in the current version.

Changes from Revision * (October 2020) to Revision A (February 2023)	Page
• Added references to OPA310 and OPA2310 in sections 5 and 6.....	9
• Added reference to <i>Parallel Amplifiers for Higher Output Power: An Improved Howland Pump Approach</i> .....	9

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