Switched-Mode-Control Based Hybrid LDO for Fine-Grain Power Management of Digital Load Circuits

Saad Bin Nasir, Student Member, IEEE, Shreyas Sen, Member, IEEE, and Arijit Raychowdhury, Senior Member, IEEE

Abstract—Switched-mode-control (SMC) is a control methodology that allows instantaneous switching between controllers to extend the dynamic range of feedback circuits. A hybrid low dropout voltage regulator utilizing SMC is designed in 130 nm CMOS for fine-grain power management, fast droop recovery, and accurate voltage regulation of digital load circuits. The design provides an optimal tradeoff between performance and accuracy by switching between a digital and an analog control loop. Measurements from the test-chip show near-threshold-voltage operation, peak transient response of 0.71 ns/mA, and a peak current efficiency of 98.64%.

Index Terms—Adaptive control, digital linear voltage regulators (LVR), embedded power management, low dropout (LDO), low-power digital circuits.

I. INTRODUCTION

FINE-GRAIN point-of-load (PoL) power management on a chip minimizes resistive losses, and enables rapid droop mitigation, high energy-efficiency and fast dynamic voltage, and frequency scaling in multi-core processors and system-on-a-chip designs [1]. Linear voltage regulators mostly operated in the low dropout (LDO) mode are favored PoL regulators due to their small size, process friendly integration, and fast response times [2], [3]. In this paper, we propose a new control topology for LDOs namely, switched-mode-control (SMC) and show its efficacy in designing low-power and fast LDOs covering a wide operational range.

PoL voltage regulation of digital load circuits needs to satisfy a different set of constraints than that offered by traditional analog load circuits [4]. For example, digital circuits can withstand a lower PSR, but require fast transient recovery under large voltage droops and operation down to near-threshold-voltage (NTV) with minimum dropout. To meet these challenges, both analog and digital LDOs are being researched [5]–[12]; and they have their own strengths and weaknesses. Analog LDOs exhibit accurate small signal (SS) regulation, but lack voltage and process scalability and the ability to handle large current transients [5], [6]. On the other hand, digital LDOs are characterized by fast large signal (LS) performance, but they lack high SS gain. They also show steady-state ripple and consume clocking and dynamic power [7]–[11].

In this paper, we propose SMC which combines controllers optimized for different metrics to increase operational range and performance without compromising the overall stability. A high-performance SMC-based hybrid LDO designed in a 130 nm CMOS process is presented in this paper. The proposed design decouples the SS gain from LS transient response by utilizing a voltage-based error signal to discretely switch from one controller to another. This is fundamentally different from other dual-loop architectures [5], [12], [13], which employ both the loops simultaneously. In such designs, the bandwidth (BW) of the high-gain loop is decreased to maintain stability [Fig. 1(a)]. The hybrid LDO uses SMC to combine the strengths of both analog and digital LDOs.

II. DESIGN DETAILS

A. SMC-Based Hybrid Design

The proposed SMC-based hybrid LDO is shown in Fig. 1(b). The controller is designed in a 130 nm CMOS process and consists of a digital loop and an analog loop. The digital loop provides a high SS gain and is used for low current droops. The analog loop provides a high BW and is used for high current droops. The two loops are connected in series and the output voltage is fed back to the input of both loops.

B. SS Gain and BW Control

The SS gain and BW of the LDO are controlled by the voltage-based error signal. When the error signal is less than a threshold voltage (Vth), the digital loop is used. When the error signal is greater than Vth, the analog loop is used. This allows the LDO to operate in both SS and LS modes, depending on the input current.

C. Conclusion

The proposed SMC-based hybrid LDO provides a good tradeoff between SS and LS performance. It can handle large current transients while maintaining high SS gain. The LDO is fabricated in a 130 nm CMOS process and has been tested extensively. The measured results show near-threshold-voltage operation, peak transient response of 0.71 ns/mA, and a peak current efficiency of 98.64%.

Fig. 1. (a) Conventional dual-loop LDOs. (b) SMC-based multiple controller LDO design.
Fig. 2. Ideal closed-loop pole locations for LS and SS controllers.

Fig. 3. Effectiveness of SMC compared to a single controller design.

The need for using SMC (first presented in [14]) instead of a single controller is motivated in Section II. In Section III, the hybrid LDO architecture is elaborated. Stability modeling of SMC and an ultra-fast response time design feature called SMC with reset control are presented in Sections IV and V, respectively. Circuit implementation of the hybrid LDO is covered in Section VI. Measurement results from the test chip are covered in Section VII followed by conclusions in Section VIII.

II. MOTIVATION FOR SWITCHED-MODE-CONTROL

Since, digital load circuits exhibit large load current ($I_{LOAD}$) changes and operate under wide operational voltage ranges (from $V_{MAX}$ to NTV), it is difficult to ensure fast transient response using a single controller across the entire current and voltage range [13]. For example, an analog LDO provides high performance at near-supply input voltage, but fails at NTV [5] and a digital LDO offers low voltage operation, but shows a reduced power efficiency if operated in high performance mode [4]. Therefore, the motivation for SMC stems from the fact that multiple controllers extend the operational range at a better power efficiency.

The step response of a second order linear system determines all the critical parameters that are needed to ascertain the effectiveness of the feedback. A fast rise time ensures quick recovery from a transient event. A fast and accurate settling ensures accurate tracking of a reference voltage ($V_{REF}$). On the other hand, a minimum overshoot reduces unwanted ringing. These three factors can be combined into a quantitative cost metric, which characterizes the typical feedback control of an LDO, defined as [15]

$$\text{Cost} = \int_{0}^{\infty} t |V_{REF} - V_{REG}| dt. \quad (1)$$

The cost defined earlier, is the minimum integral of time-multiplied absolute-value of error. It shows a high sensitivity to the three discussed parameters crucial to any second-order system dynamics. The cost increases if the rise time is slow or settling takes longer or the response shows large overshoot or undershoot. In linear voltage regulation, optimality criterion for LS region is fast rise time ($T_{RISE}$). For SS region, it is fast settling time ($T_{SETTLING}$) with minimum overshoot. SMC allows the two separate optimal controllers to be combined by switching at a threshold to achieve an overall optimal response to LS current transients. Location of the dominant pole of the overall system for each controller determines its response, as illustrated in Fig. 2. For a fast LS response, the dominant poles of the system should have a low damping which enables a small $T_{RISE}$. On the other hand, a short $T_{SETTLING}$ is achieved by placing the dominant poles of the system deep in the left half s-plane. It can be clearly seen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>SELECTION OF LS CONTROLLER TOPOLOGY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Type of LDO</td>
<td>Analog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rise Time</td>
<td>Slow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Signal Gain</td>
<td>High</td>
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<tr>
<td>Process Scalability</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design Automation</td>
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<td>Performance Adaptation</td>
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<td>Design Choice</td>
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<th>Table II</th>
<th>SELECTION OF SS CONTROLLER TOPOLOGY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dominant Pole Location</td>
<td>Internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$V_{DROOP}$</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSR over all frequency</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGF</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light Load Stability</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>On chip Integration</td>
<td>Standard</td>
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<td>Design Choice</td>
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that an SMC based on the combination of an underdamped and overdamped controllers outperforms both individually in terms of the cost metric defined in (1) as shown through the step response of different systems in Fig. 3. 

A. Use of SMC in Digital LDO Designs

Although we introduce SMC-based LDOs in this paper, it is worth noting that many recent LDO designs with state-of-the-art performance incorporate SMC in one form or the other,
albeit implicitly. Nasir et al. [8] and Salem et al. [16] have used a single controller but multiple modes of operation (and hence, multiple controllers) to enable fast recovery from load transients. Similarly, Yang et al. [9], Huang et al. [17], and Tsou et al. [18] have used different quantization of power stages to enable fine or coarse-grain control. Multiple controllers in SMC-like configuration are employed in [19] and [20] to achieve fast transient and low ripple steady-state performance. Hence the authors believe that a unifying treatment of SMC is critical to analyze the dynamics of a family of LDOs that have gained popularity. The stability modeling of SMC presented in Section IV can be adapted to model these recently published designs.

III. HYBRID LDO DESIGN ARCHITECTURE

A. Choice of SS and LS Controllers

Choosing optimal controllers for each region of operation ensures optimal performance across the complete current and voltage operational range. As summarized in Table I, a higher integration density, process scalability, design automation, low voltage operation and most importantly, ultra-fast response without slew limitation, makes digital LDO an ideal choice to act as the LS controller. It allows faster recovery from load transients and offers wider operating voltages. In addition to that, a digital LDO can be adaptively made severely underdamped with a fast clock as desired for the LS controller [8]. For SS controller, a small quiescent power consumption, high SS gain, and ripple-free SS response makes analog LDO the design choice. Analog LDOs can be further divided into two major categories (Table II), internal pole dominant (IPD) and output pole dominant (OPD) LDOs. OPD analog LDOs offer better PSR, faster droop compensation, and light load stability compared to their IPD counterparts [5]. Therefore, the SS controller design choice should be an OPD analog LDO. It should be mentioned here that a high-resolution digital LDO is ill-suited to be used as an SS regulator as it suffers from LCOS and limited gain unless high dynamic power budget and clock routing resources are available. Conventionally, a small on-die capacitance budget limits its use in PoL voltage regulation as an OPD analog LDO loses its phase margin (PM) with increasing $I_{LOAD}$ for a given output capacitance. The presented hybrid topology overcomes this integration challenge by using LS controller to deliver most of $I_{LOAD}$, relaxing the constraints on the SS controller design.

B. Hybrid LDO Operation

The digital LS controller turns on a power transistor array in a thermometer fashion until $V_{REG}$ reaches $V_{REF} - \Delta_-$. Once $V_{REG}$ enters the dead zone, LS controller is clock gated and the SS controller provides the remaining $I_{LOAD}$ bringing $V_{REG}$ to $V_{REF}$. For an overshoot, $V_{REF} + \Delta_+$ acts as the dead-zone boundary with SS controller operational when $V_{REG} < V_{REF} + \Delta_+$. The LS digital controller power transistors are designed to provide 80%–90% of the $I_{LOAD}$, whereas the SS analog controller provides the remaining 10%–20% of $I_{LOAD}$ at the maximum current rating. This range is ensured keeping in perspective that an increased $I_{LOAD}$ contribution from the analog LDO diminishes the performance gains of an all-digital LDO as elaborated in [21]. The high operational BW of the LS controller makes SS controller ineffective when it is active and $V_{REG}$ is out of the dead zone. Therefore, there is no need to explicitly turn off the SS controller when $V_{REF} - V_{REG} > |\Delta|$. This also helps in eradicating switching noise and power overhead of explicitly switching SS analog controller on or off. The dead zone helps bound the limit cycle oscillations (LCOs) in digital LS controller when it is operated at a high frequency of operation by increasing the stability of the hybrid LDO [4]. The choice of switching thresholds ($\Delta_-$ and $\Delta_+$) not only ensures stable operation (no chattering between the two controllers) but also makes sure that the analog LDO only provides a small portion of the total $I_{LOAD}$ (10%–20%), thereby assisting the dominant digital operation of the hybrid LDO through an OPD analog.
Fig. 10. LS controller with clock generation through a five-stage current-starved VCO. Reset SMC is enabled when Asynchronous mode = 1.

Fig. 11. OPD analog LDO as the SS controller.

Fig. 12. Simulated PM of the hybrid LDO at $V_{\text{REG}} = 1$ V.

LDO design. The switching between the two controllers is summarized through the control schematic, as shown in Fig. 4, and a complete system architecture of the proposed hybrid LDO is shown in Fig. 5 with operational plots in Fig. 6(a)–(c). Digital load circuits are mimicked by NMOS transistors. Their strength is scanning programmable, allowing both transient and steady-state current changes on the order of picosecond. A 500 pF (at 1 V) MOS capacitor serves as the load capacitor to mimic a realistic capacitance offered by a medium-sized digital function unit [10].

IV. STABILITY MODELING

To stitch a fast and underdamped LS digital controller to a slow and damped SS analog controller in a stable fashion, a dead zone is established using two thresholds above ($\Delta_+$) and below ($\Delta_-$) $V_{\text{REF}}$. The digital LS controller creates LCOs due to its discrete nature of operation. These LCOs are created by periodically turning on/off power transistors. The number of power transistors turned on/off in steady state is called mode. The mode of LCO increases with higher $F_S$. As a result, the $V_{\text{REG}}$ voltage ripple frequency ($F_{\text{LCO,LS}}$) decreases. On the other hand, the $V_{\text{REG}}$ voltage ripple amplitude ($A_{\text{LCO,LS}}$) decreases when $F_S$ increases, but shows a jump rise whenever the mode of LCO increases. For more details on the existence, conditions, and magnitude of LCO, interested readers are pointed to [4] and [22] for further reading. For stable and chattering-less settling to $V_{\text{REF}}$, the SS controllers

Fig. 13. Simulated PM and unity gain BW of the SS controller across its complete $I_{\text{LOAD}}$ range at $V_{\text{REG}} = 1$ V.

Fig. 14. Die micrograph with chip details.
must have enough loop gain \((K_{SS})\) and BW \((F_{0dB,SS})\) to suppress the oscillations generated by the digital LS controller. Stable operation of the hybrid LDO can be achieved by satisfying the design constraints (2)–(4): \(A_{LCO,LS}\) and \(F_{LCO,LS}\) refer to the voltage ripple amplitude and frequency of the LCO generated by the LS controller if it is operated without any

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If } A_{LCO,LS} > (V_{REF} + \Delta_+ - V_{REF} + \Delta_-) & ; \text{ then } F_{0dB,SS} > F_{LCO,LS} \\
\text{If } F_{0dB,SS} < F_{LCO,LS} & ; \text{ then } A_{LCO,LS} < (V_{REF} + \Delta_+ - V_{REF} + \Delta_-) \\
V_{REF} - \Delta_- < \left( V_{REF} - \frac{V_{REF}}{1 + K_{SS}} \right) & < V_{REF} + \Delta_+ \\
\end{align*}
\]

\text{Bandwidth Constraint} \quad (2) \\
\text{Amplitude Constraint} \quad (3) \\
\text{Small Signal Gain Constraint.} \quad (4)
dead-zone and SS controller. The BW constraint in (2), as shown at the bottom of this page, implies that if the dead zone is small compared to the LS controller power transistors quantization then we need \( F_{0DB,SS} \) higher than \( F_{LCO,LS} \) to ensure stable settling. On the other hand, the amplitude constraint in (3), as shown at the bottom of this page, implies that if the \( F_{0DB,SS} \) is less than \( F_{LCO,LS} \) then \( A_{LCO,LS} \) must be less than the dead zone to ensure stable settling. The SS gain constraint in (4), as shown at the bottom of this page, implies that \( K_{SS} \) must be large enough to ensure that the steady-state voltage error is less than the dead-zone size to avoid chattering between LS and SS controllers. One of the BW or amplitude constraints and SS gain constraint must be satisfied to guarantee stable operation of the hybrid LDO. Possible worst case amplitude constraint (3) violations occur under light-load conditions and frequency constraint (2) violations occur at very high operational frequencies as shown in SPICE simulation of Fig. 7.

A large dead zone ensures that multiple power transistors of the LS controllers are needed to traverse it. At iso-\( F_{S} \), it implies a decreased \( F_{LCO,LS} \) relaxing the specification on \( F_{0DB,SS} \). Similarly, a large dead zone also relaxes the specification on \( K_{SS} \). If \( F_{LCO} \) induced by the LS controller in the dead zone lies below \( F_{0DB} \) of the SS controller, and the dead zone is large enough to ensure that \( A_{LCO,LS} < (\Delta_+ + \Delta_-) \) then the hybrid LDO is guaranteed to be stable. The exact settling time and accuracy of the output voltage are dependent on the load regulation of the SS controller. A higher \( F_{0DB} \) ensures that oscillations in the dead zone quickly die down resulting in faster settling, as shown in Fig. 8. The voltage settles down to \( V_{REF} \) within an error bounded by the loop gain \( (K_{SS}) \) of the SS regulator.

Although a larger dead-zone enables a more relaxed specification on the BW of the SS controller, it may not be suitable for early detection and mitigation of voltage droops and overshoots. More discussion on the selection of thresholds for the hybrid LDO is carried out in Section VII with test-chip measurements. As evident from the earlier discussion, amplitude and BW conditions for a digital LS controller are easy to formulate owing to its discrete nature of operation. This allows well-posed constraints for achieving stable hybrid LDO operation. In case the LS controller is analog, similar amplitude and frequency conditions can be devised by identifying the natural frequency and damping coefficient from the closed-loop pole location.

V. SMC WITH RESET CONTROL

Synchronous digital circuits are designed with a guard-band to operate as soon as the voltage is high enough (\( \geq V_{MIN} \), where \( V_{MIN} = V_{REF} - \) voltage guard-band added to ensure correct operation under variations) to support a target operational frequency \( (F_{OP}) \) [23]. Therefore, any voltage higher than \( V_{MIN} \) ensures that the underlying circuit can resume operation without any timing errors in the pipeline of digital circuits. For such load circuits, ultra-fast droop recovery to \( V_{MIN} \) is necessary for high-performance quick resumption of operation. To meet this requirement, we propose a reset mode in the hybrid SMC-based LDO. This mode enables ultra-fast droop recovery to \( V_{REF} \) under the condition that the constraints on the overshoot are relaxed. In this extreme non-linear design, as soon as the output voltage reaches \( V_{REF} - \Delta_- \), all the power MOSFETs of the digital loop are “turned on,” enabling ultra-fast \( T_{RISE} \). After recovering from the droop, the system undergoes a large overshoot (always less than \( V_{IN} \) as inherent negative feedback of PMOS \( V_{SD} \) kicks in against decreasing voltage headroom) and finally settles down to \( V_{REF} \) in an overdamped fashion never falling below \( V_{MIN} \). This reset mode SMC is compared with the regular operation of the hybrid LDO in SMC configuration through the representative operational plot shown in Fig. 9. It shows a faster \( T_{RISE} \) ensuring an early resumption of the digital load operation than achievable through the SMC design. This reset mode feature is designed as a part of the digital LS controller. The reset mode is recommended for fast droop recovery under large transient events like clock un-gating and under the assumption that the constraints on the overshoot are relaxed. The reset mode is enabled by the non-linear SMC by allowing the loop dynamics to be completely different in the two regions: quick and underdamped in undershoot and slow and overdamped in overshoot.

VI. HYBRID LDO CIRCUIT IMPLEMENTATION

A. LS Controller Design

A synchronous all-digital LDO with 16 output power transistors is implemented. The small array size with large power transistors as opposed to a larger array size with smaller transistors guarantees a fast LS response [8]. It comprises of four stages, namely, a detection stage to determine the magnitude of the voltage error, a comparison stage to determine the sign of the voltage error, a control stage, and an actuator stage. The detection stage consists of two strongARM latch-based clocked comparators. They are used to compare \( V_{REG} \) with \( V_{REF} - \Delta_- \) and \( V_{REF} + \Delta_+ \) to establish if \( |V_{REF} - V_{REG}| > |\Delta| \). The comparators are designed to operate up to 1 \( GHz \). If \( V_{REG} \) is found to be \( < V_{REF} - \Delta_- \) or \( > V_{REF} + \Delta_+ \), i.e., out of the dead zone, the clock signal is un-gated to the
Fig. 19. Line regulation measurements with (a) $V_{\text{IN}} = 1.2$ V (for hybrid) and $V_{\text{IN}} = 0.6$ V (digital only) and (b) with complete $V_{\text{IN}}$ range for hybrid LDO.

Fig. 20. PSR measurements with $V_{\text{IN}} = 1.2$ V (for hybrid), $V_{\text{IN}} = 0.6$ V (digital only) with a scope capture when $F_{\text{NOISE}} = 100$ kHz.

Fig. 21. Measured operation and droop recovery for (a) reset mode SMC and (b) SMC.

following comparison stage. The comparison stage consists of a single strongARM latch-based clocked comparator. It is only operational if the clock is available to it from the preceding detection stage. Once ON, it compares $V_{\text{REG}}$ with $V_{\text{REF}}$. The control stage consists of a 16-bit bidirectional shift register. If $V_{\text{REG}} < V_{\text{REF}}$, the shift register passes a “0” to turn on a power transistor and if $V_{\text{REG}} > V_{\text{REF}}$ then it passes a “1” to turn off a power transistor, in the final actuator stage. The comparison stage operates at the positive clock edge, whereas, the control stages uses the negative clock edge for its operation. This dual edge triggering allows a lower control signal latency. The final actuator stage consists of an array of 16 power transistors.

In reset mode, all the transistors are instantaneously switched ON by resetting the shift register when a droop is detected by $V_{\text{REF}} - \Delta_-$ comparator. A regular digital LDO
operation is resumed for $V_{\text{REG}} > V_{\text{REF}}$ at a slower $F_S$. The power transistor array is designed to provide a maximum current ($I_{\text{LOAD}}$) of 12 mA consuming a total area of 27.68 $\mu$m$^2$. The clock for the LS controller is generated with five-stage current-starved inverter-based voltage controlled oscillator (VCO). The bias voltage control of this VCO is available externally on a pad. The oscillator frequency can be tuned up to 1 GHz. A detailed circuit implementation of the LS controller along with the current-starved VCO is shown in Fig. 10.

**B. SS Controller Design**

An OPD analog LDO is designed to provide high gain and BW for SS regulation. The proposed LDO is designed to deliver 40 $\mu$A to 2.5 mA without the use of any internal capacitors to achieve stable operation. This is achieved by creating two replicas, each capable of providing up to 1.25 mA current while consuming less than 82 $\mu$A quiescent current combined. The first stage of the OPD analog LDO comprises of a self-biased transconductance ($g_m$) stage. It uses a differential pair with diode-connected load transistors, as shown in Fig. 11. To make the output node pole dominant, all the internal poles of the LDO need to be at frequencies at least 10 $\times$ higher than the output pole. This is achieved by employing two separate techniques as follows:

1) Using smaller size of the power transistor through the hybrid topology.
2) Putting in a shunt buffer between the first stage and the power transistor to further push the pole at the gate of the power transistor to a higher frequency

An adaptive shunt buffer stage is inserted between the power transistor and the $g_m$ stage [24]. If the first stage is directly connected to the power transistor, the impedance at the power transistor gate is not small enough to guarantee the stability with the output capacitance in a sub-nanofarad range. Therefore, the shunt buffer stage is used to divide this pole (second dominant) into two high-frequency poles calculated as

$$P_2 \approx 1/2\pi R_{\text{OUT,OTA}}C_{\text{GS,M11}}$$

$$P_3 \approx 1/2\pi R_{\text{OUT,BUFF,CS,MPA}}$$

$$\approx g_{m11}(1 + g_{m13}) + g_{m12}/2\pi C_{\text{GS,MPA}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (5)

$P_2$ is pushed to a higher frequency, as the gate capacitance offered by M11 is very small compared to that of MPA. $P_3$ is pushed to a higher frequency as the resistance at the gate of MPA decreases due to the shunt feedback implemented through transistors M11–M13. M13 samples the voltage at the gate of the power MOS and uses M13 to adjust the current to complete the shunt feedback loop.

Worst stability condition for the SS regulator occurs at the maximum $I_{\text{LOAD}}$, as the dominant output pole is at its highest possible frequency. Maintaining a high PM requires the shunt feedback loop to be effective when the voltage at the gate of MPA has decreased to provide maximum $I_{\text{LOAD}}$. This is ensured by increasing the biasing current flowing through the diode-connected transistor M12 through the increased $V_{\text{GS}}$.

A simulated bode plot near $I_{\text{MAX}}$, as shown in Fig. 12, highlights the achieved high PM at a high $I_{\text{LOAD}}$ condition.

**C. Stability Analysis of the Hybrid LDO**

As mentioned in Section III, SS controller is designed to reject the noise in the dead zone created by the LS controller. SS load regulation capacity of the SS controller is equivalent to its loop gain and BW. Given the adaptive nature of the shunt feedback buffer, $P_3$ is the least dominant pole that adapts with changing $I_{\text{LOAD}}$. Therefore, loading at output of the buffer can be neglected resulting in a second-order SS loop gain for the SS controller given as

$$\text{Loop Gain}(s) \approx -0.75g_{\text{OUT,OTA}}R_{\text{OUT,OTA}}g_{m\text{MPA}}R_{\text{LOAD}}/(1 + sR_{\text{OUT,OTA}}CG_{\text{S,M11}})(1 + sR_{\text{LOAD}}C_{\text{LOAD}}).$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

The location of the $P_{\text{DOM}}$ is directly proportional to the $I_{\text{LOAD}}$ given as

$$P_{\text{DOM}} \approx I_{\text{LOAD}}/2\pi V_{\text{LOAD}}C_{\text{LOAD}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (8)

As evident from the bode plot in Figs. 12 and 13, the system behaves like a single pole system in the specified current range. The unity gain BW ($F_{\text{0,DB,SS}}$) of the SS regulator across $I_{\text{LOAD}}$ is 10.4 ($I_{\text{LOAD}} = 20 \mu$A) and 84 MHz ($I_{\text{LOAD}} = 10$ mA), and the loop gain ($K_{\text{SS}}$) ranges from 40 ($I_{\text{LOAD}} = 10$ mA) to 28 dB ($I_{\text{LOAD}} = 20 \mu$A).

On the other hand, the LS controller induces $F_{\text{LCO,LS}} = 46$ MHz and $A_{\text{LCO,LS}} = 66$ mV at $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 10$ mA and $F_S = 1$ GHz and $F_{\text{LCO,LS}} = 63$ MHz and $A_{\text{LCO,LS}} = 254$ mV at $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 2$ mA and $F_S = 1$ GHz for dropout voltage of 200 mA. These results are obtained through simulations when LS controller is enabled without any dead zone with a dropout of 200 mA. We observe that at $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 10$ mA, $F_{\text{0,SS}} > F_{\text{LCO,LS}}$ satisfying (2) and at $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 2$ mA ($I_{\text{LOAD}} >$ single digital power transistor), $A_{\text{LCO,LS}} < |\text{dead zone}|$ satisfying (3). Throughout these operating conditions, $I_{\text{BIAS}}$ of analog SS controller ensures that (4) is always satisfied. In case, $I_{\text{LOAD}} < 2$ mA ($I_{\text{LOAD}} <$ single digital power transistor), and $F_S = 1$ GHz, $A_{\text{LCO,LS}}$ is less than 5 mV due to the low-pass filtering effect of the high operational frequency of the digital LS controller [4]. As a result, (3) is always satisfied resulting in stable operation of
the hybrid LDO even under light-load conditions (bounded by the minimum \( I_{\text{LOAD}} \) for stable operation of the SS analog controller). Thanks to the adaptive \( F_{0\text{dB,SS}} \) of the SS regulator due to its OPD configuration, stability constraints of SMC defined in Section IV are always satisfied resulting in a stable operation of the proposed hybrid LDO across the complete operational range.

VII. MEASUREMENT RESULTS

Chip micrograph of the presented hybrid LDO fabricated in 130 nm CMOS is shown in Fig. 14. The LDO runs from a \( V_{\text{IN}} \) of 1.1 to 1.2 V with a dropout \( (V_{\text{DO}}) = 100–300 \text{ mV} \) and provides \( I_{\text{LOAD}} = 12 \text{ mA} \) at a nominal \( V_{\text{DO}} = 100 \text{ mV} \). For \( V_{\text{IN}} = 0.6 \text{ V} \) (NTV mode), the LDO is reconfigured to operate in a fully digital mode. It regulates for a minimum of \( V_{\text{DO}} = 50 \text{ mV} \) and provides up to \( I_{\text{LOAD}} = 2 \text{ mA} \) at \( V_{\text{REG}} = 0.5 \text{ V} \). Chattering (unstable behavior) is observed when the analog SS controller is turned off and shows accurate steady-state settling once it is enabled, as shown in the scope captures of Fig. 15. Extensive load regulation measurements (Fig. 16) are performed across the complete operational range including hybrid and all-digital modes. The worst case measurement
showed 2.67 mV/mA for $I_{LOAD}$ up to 12 mA and 3.1 mV/mA for the maximum transient load step change of 10.3 mA. Load regulation can be further improved by increasing the SS controller gain at maximum $I_{LOAD}$. A $T_{RISE}$ and $T_{SETTLING}$ of 25 and 45 ns are measured for a load step from 30 $\mu$A to 8.6 mA and a $T_{SETTLING}$ of 2.8 $\mu$s is measured from an overshoot generated for a load step from 8.6 mA to 30 $\mu$A as captured on scope in Fig. 17. In this case, LS controller is operated at an $F_S = 540$ MHz. The hybrid LDO is turned into an all-digital LDO for $V_{IN} < 600$ mV operating at 54.4 MHz. Scope capture proves regulation at $V_{REF} = 500$ mV with a small ripple as shown in Fig. 18.

The hybrid topology exhibits high line regulation (on average < 5 mV error), as shown by the linearity of graph in Fig. 19. A 43.75 dB average gain is measured at 1 V from the measurements for the complete operational range of the hybrid LDO. As opposed to purely digital LDO topologies, which fail to provide considerable power supply noise rejection (PSR), the presented hybrid topology shows an average of 10–12 dB PSR from 1 Hz to 10 MHz. As shown in Fig. 20, the high BW of the PSR graph (and the absence of PSR peaking which is typical of IPD LDOs due to degradation of the loop gain) also demonstrates the OPD behavior of the designed SS controller. Scope capture shows a PSR greater than 9 dB at 100 kHz (see Fig. 20). The improved PSR in the hybrid topology stems from the noise rejection capability of the analog SS controller. This is in stark contrast to an all-digital controller where we measured a nominal PSR of only 3 dB.

Fig. 21 shows the scope capture of fast transient response both in SMC and reset SMC modes. A $T_{RISE} = 18$ ns and $T_{SETTLING} = 32$ ns (<2% of $V_{REG}$) are achieved for a load step of 30 $\mu$A to 10.3 mA at $V_{REG} = 1.05$ V from $V_{IN} = 1.2$ V in the SMC mode. In the reset mode, a $T_{RISE} = 6$ ns and $T_{SETTLING} = 37$ ns (<2% of $V_{REG}$) are achieved for a load step of 200 $\mu$A to 8.6 mA (200 ps rise/fall time) at $V_{REG} = 1.05$ V from $V_{IN} = 1.2$ V. In comparison, a digital load circuit that operates for $V_{REG} \leq V_{REF}$ can resume operation after just 6 ns in reset mode as compared to 18 ns in SMC mode, as summarized in Fig. 22. This represents a droop recovery time of 0.71 ns/mA compared to 1.74 ns/mA, for SMC-based design. Reset mode SMC provides the best response in droop mitigation and rise time. Measurements show that SMC achieves a comparable performance to the reset mode with increasing $F_S$ of the LS controller. In terms of settling time for $V_{REG}$, SMC becomes faster than the reset mode SMC as $F_S$ of the LS controller increases (see Fig. 23). This can be easily explained by the fact that the reset mode SMC design overcompensates the voltage droop and discharges slowly to $V_{REF}$. The slow discharge, however, ensures stable and smooth settling in the reset mode. A worst case voltage droop of 240 mV is measured in both reset and nominal mode at high $F_S$ (> 600 MHz). The large voltage droop magnitude is attributed to the clocked comparator sampling delay, 200 ps step transition in load conditions and small on-chip MOS decoupling capacitor of 500 pf.

As elaborated in Sections III and IV, in SMC, we can employ a higher LS controller $F_S$ and use adaptive BW of SS controller and dead zone to ensure that the hybrid LDO is stable. Scope captures for increasing LS controller $F_S$ shows that $V_{REG}$ does not undergo any oscillation between the two thresholds when $F_S \approx 138$ MHz; whereas, it undergoes only a single oscillation between the two thresholds before it settles down even at a higher $F_S \approx 560$ MHz. In all the scope captures of Fig. 24, stable settling of $V_{REG} = V_{REF}$ can be observed. As discussed in Section IV, an optimal placement of the two

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**Fig. 25.** Measurements for selection of optimal $\Delta$- for (a) droop reduction and (b) settling time.

**Fig. 26.** Measured current efficiency of the hybrid LDO.
A hybrid LDO based on SMC designed in 130 nm CMOS process featuring both digital and analog loops is presented in this paper. It utilizes SMC as a control law that allows a wider dynamic range of operation both in voltage and current. Stability and performance modeling of SMC are presented in detail and can be applied to related designs as elaborated in the paper. The hybrid LDO design is tailored to meet PoL voltage regulation in digital load circuits with wide workload dynamics. Measurements from the test chip show NTV operation, fast transient response of 0.71 ns/mA, and a peak current efficiency of 98.64%.

TABLE III

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison With State-of-the-Art</th>
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<tr>
<td>Type</td>
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<td>Technology</td>
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<td>LDO Type</td>
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<td>Droop @ Load Step</td>
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<tr>
<td>Droop recovery time</td>
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<td>FOM1</td>
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<td>FOM2</td>
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FOM1 = Droop recovery time / Load Step; FOM2 = (Transient Time) * ICTL/IMAX

NA = Insufficient data; * Normalized to technology node

REFERENCES


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