

# Full On-Chip CMOS Low-Dropout Voltage Regulator

Robert J. Milliken, Jose Silva-Martínez, *Senior Member, IEEE*, and Edgar Sánchez-Sinencio, *Fellow, IEEE*

**Abstract**—This paper proposes a solution to the present bulky external capacitor low-dropout (LDO) voltage regulators with an external capacitorless LDO architecture. The large external capacitor used in typical LDOs is removed allowing for greater power system integration for system-on-chip (SoC) applications. A compensation scheme is presented that provides both a fast transient response and full range alternating current (ac) stability from 0- to 50-mA load current even if the output load is as high as 100 pF. The 2.8-V capacitorless LDO voltage regulator with a power supply of 3 V was fabricated in a commercial 0.35- $\mu\text{m}$  CMOS technology, consuming only 65  $\mu\text{A}$  of ground current with a dropout voltage of 200 mV. Experimental results demonstrate that the proposed capacitorless LDO architecture overcomes the typical load transient and ac stability issues encountered in previous architectures.

**Index Terms**—Analog circuits, capacitorless low dropout (LDO), dc-dc regulator, fast path, LDO voltage regulators, transient compensation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

INDUSTRY is pushing towards complete system-on-chip (SoC) design solutions that include power management. The study of power management techniques has increased spectacularly within the last few years corresponding to a vast increase in the use of portable, handheld battery operated devices. Power management seeks to improve the device's power efficiency resulting in prolonged battery life and operating time for the device. A power management system contains several subsystems including linear regulators, switching regulators, and control logic [1]. The control logic changes the attributes of each subsystem; turning the outputs on and off as well as changing the output voltage levels, to optimize the power consumption of the device.

This paper focuses on low-dropout (LDO) voltage regulators. LDO regulators are an essential part of the power management system that provides constant voltage supply rails. They fall into a class of linear voltage regulators with improved power efficiency. Efficiency is improved over conventional linear regulators by replacing the common-drain pass element with a common-source pass element to reduce the minimum required voltage drop across the control device [1]–[5]. Smaller voltage headroom in the pass element results in less power dissipation, making LDO regulators more suitable for low-voltage, on-chip, power management solutions.

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R. J. Milliken was with the Analog and Mixed Signal Group, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843 USA. He is now with the Linear Technology, Colorado Springs, CO 80920 USA.

J. Jose Silva-Martínez and E. Sánchez-Sinencio are with the Analog and Mixed Signal Group, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843 USA (e-mail: jsilva@ece.tamu.edu; sanchez@ece.tamu.edu).

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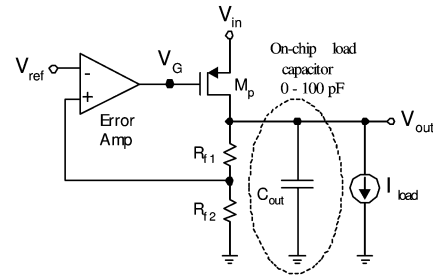


Fig. 1. External capacitorless LDO voltage regulator.

The conventional LDO voltage regulator, for stability requirements, requires a relatively large output capacitor in the single microfarad range. Large microfarad capacitors cannot be realized in current design technologies, thus each LDO regulator needs an external pin for a board mounted output capacitor. To overcome this issue, a capacitorless LDO has been proposed in [2]; that topology is, however, unstable at low currents making it unattractive for real applications. This paper poses to remove the large external capacitor, while guaranteeing stability under all operating conditions. Removing the large off-chip output capacitor also reduces the board real estate and the overall cost of the design and makes it suitable for SoC designs.

Removing the external capacitor requires a sound compensation scheme for both the transient response and the alternating current (ac) stability. Section II describes the characteristics of the uncompensated capacitorless LDO regulator including the pole locations and transient behavior needed to realize the proposed LDO architecture developed in Section III. A compensated 2.8-V, 50-mA capacitorless LDO regulator with a power supply of 3 V was fabricated in a TSMC 0.35- $\mu\text{m}$  CMOS process through the MOSIS educational service with the experimental results shown in Section IV and concluding remarks in Section V.

## II. UNCOMPENSATED LDO

Most of the conventional LDO performances are greatly affected when the external capacitor is reduced by several orders of magnitude. The absence of a large external output capacitor presents several design challenges both for ac stability and load transient response. Conventional LDO regulators use a large external capacitor to create the dominant pole and to provide an instantaneous charge source during fast load transients [3]–[5]. Thus, a capacitorless LDO requires an internal fast transient path to compensate for the absence of the large external capacitor. To realize the task at hand, the basic capacitorless LDO regulator, shown in Fig. 1, is revisited in the following section.

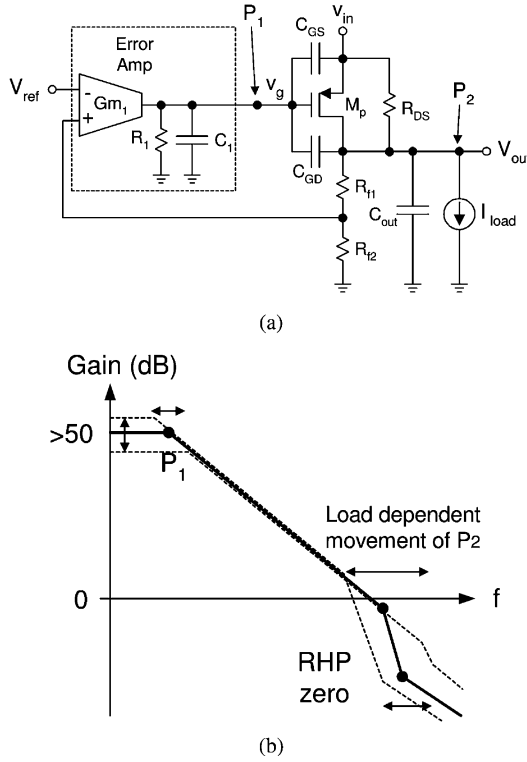


Fig. 2. (a) Equivalent circuit of LDO voltage regulator and (b) pole locations for uncompensated capacitorless LDO voltage regulator;  $C_{load}$  around 100 pF.

#### A. Uncompensated AC Response

One of the most significant side effects in LDOs is stability degradation due to the several poles embedded in the loop. As shown in Fig. 2(a), the uncompensated capacitorless LDO has two major poles: the error amplifier output pole  $P_1$  and the load dependent output pole  $P_2$ .

Usually, the standalone error amplifier has at least one internal pole located at relatively high frequency. The equivalent pass transistor input capacitance  $C_{GS}$  adds significant capacitance, roughly 60–80 pF, to the error amplifier output impedance.  $C_{GD}$  also forms a Miller capacitor which increases the effective input capacitance by the gain of the pass transistor, typically more than  $-10$  V/V. Usually,  $M_P$  is very large in order to reduce  $V_{DSAT}$ , therefore  $C_{GD}$  is in the range of tens of picofarads. If the loop is opened, the location of  $P_1$  at the gate of  $M_P$  is given by

$$P_1 = \frac{1}{R_1 \cdot (C_1 + C_{GS} + A_{pass}C_{GD})} \quad (1)$$

where  $A_{pass}$  is the voltage gain of the pass transistor  $M_P$ . Thus, the pole  $P_1$  resides at low frequency, typically several kilohertz since the output resistance of the error amplifier  $R_1$  is relatively

large to have enough direct current (dc) loop gain and to eliminate the need of an additional buffer. Since the gain of the pass transistor changes with varying load current,  $P_1$  is therefore load dependent, but usually less sensitive than the output pole  $P_2$ . The second pole  $P_2$  is located at the LDO's output, as shown in (2), at the bottom of the page, where  $G_{mP}$  is the transconductance gain of the pass transistor,  $R_{out}$  is the equivalent resistance due to the current loading effects, and  $C_{out}$  is the on-chip load capacitance mainly due to the system to be driven; typically, in the range of few picofarads up to 100 pF. The pass transistor  $G_{mP}$  and  $R_{DS}$  increases and decreases, respectively, for increasing load current making  $P_2$  very sensitive to the LDO's load conditions. Large load currents push the output pole  $P_2$  to higher frequencies well past  $P_1$ . At low currents, the effective load resistance increases significantly;  $P_2$  is pushed to lower frequencies. Unfortunately,  $R_{DS}$  can be as large as 30 k $\Omega$  leading to a pole's frequency around 50 kHz if  $C_{load}$  is in the range of 100 pF and if the effect of  $C_{GD}$  is ignored. Due to the unavoidable parasitic poles, loop stability cannot be guaranteed due to the decreased phase margin. Therefore, the uncompensated capacitorless LDO regulator may not be stable especially at the no-load condition. A side effect of  $C_{GD}$  is the generation of a right-hand plane (RHP) zero  $Z_1 (\approx G_{mP}/C_{GD})$  that reduces loop phase margin; a simplified magnitude plot is shown in Fig. 2(b).

Fig. 3(a) shows the pole movement for the open-loop uncompensated capacitorless LDO regulator for  $C_{out} = 100$  pF and two load conditions: 0 and 50 mA. The dc gain is current load dependent and changes by roughly 10 dB between 0 and 50 mA load variations.  $P_2$  varies approximately from 50 kHz to very high frequencies. This large variation in pole movement causes large fluctuations in phase margin. Most of the variations are absorbed between 0 and 1 mA of load current where the pass transistor enters in the subthreshold region, and the output pole movement in this range is very large, as shown in Fig. 3(b). Above 1 mA of load current, usually the LDO regulator becomes stable. It is worth mentioning that  $P_2$  is located at higher frequencies if  $C_{load}$  is smaller, leading to better phase margin even at low output currents; thus, only the worst case is analyzed in the following subsections:  $C_{load} = 100$  pF.

Conventional LDO regulator analysis usually ignores the feedforward zero due to the pass transistor's  $C_{GD}$ . In fact, Table I shows that the feedforward zero falls beyond the typical LDO's open-loop unity gain frequency, and therefore, does not typically surface during the conventional LDO regulator ac analysis. However, it is worth mentioning that this RHP zero  $Z_1$  attracts complex poles to the right-hand side of the S-plane, degrading the loop's stability. The presented external capacitorless LDO regulator requires a gain-bandwidth product of around 500 kHz. At those frequencies, the feedforward zero has noticeable effects at low load currents.

$$P_2 \cong \frac{1}{\left( R_{DS} \parallel (R_{f1} + R_{f2}) \parallel R_{out} \parallel \left( \left( \frac{C_{GD}}{C_1 + C_{GS} + C_{GD}} \right) \frac{1}{G_{mP}} \right) \right) C_{out}} \quad (2)$$

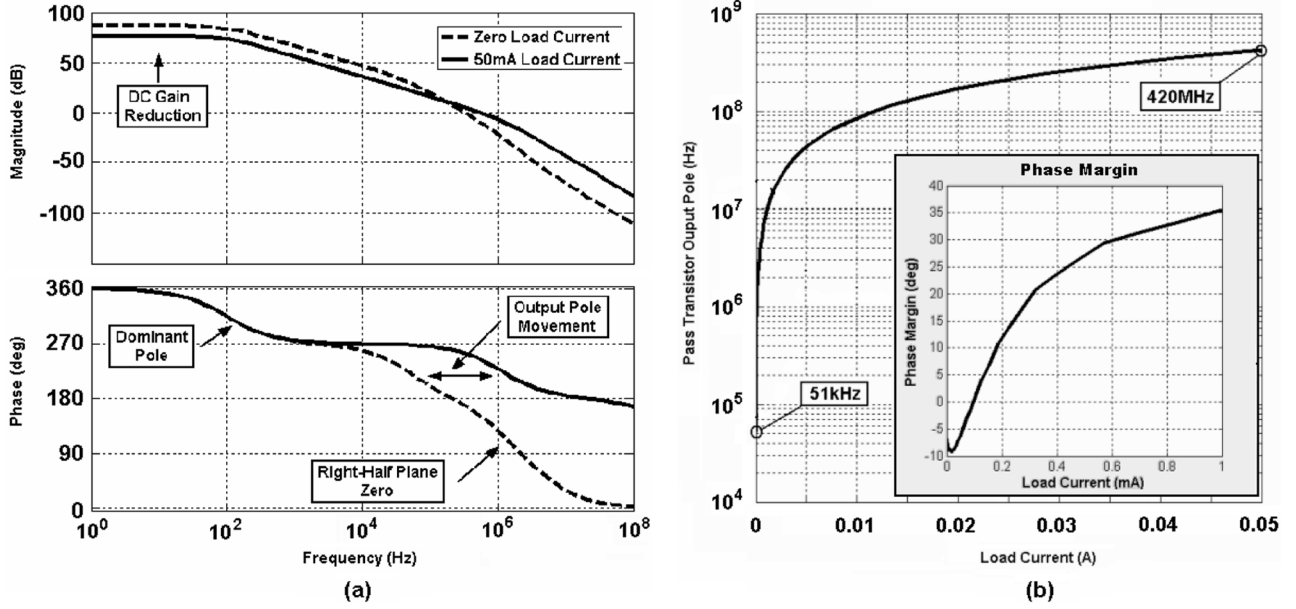


Fig. 3. Uncompensated capacitorless LDO ac response. (a) Bode plot. (b) Output pole frequency and phase margin verse load current.

TABLE I  
TYPICAL LDO LOAD-DEPENDENT POLES AND ZEROS

Parameter	Variant	Effect of increased load current	Range (0 ~ 50mA)
$P_1$	$G_{m_p}, R_{OUT}$	DECREASE	$\sim 100\text{Hz}$
$P_2$ (output)	$R_{OUT}$	INCREASE	50kHz ~ 420MHz
$Z_1$	$G_{m_p}$	INCREASE	3.4MHz ~ 1GHz
Loop gain	$G_{m_p}, R_{OUT}$	DECREASE	80dB ~ 72dB

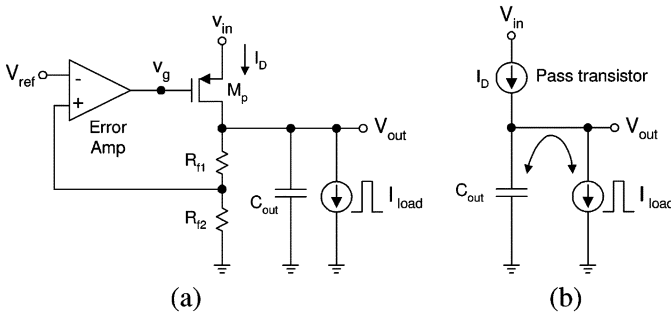


Fig. 4. Effects of limited loop bandwidth under fast load transients. (a) Basic linear regulator. (b) Equivalent circuit for fast load transients.

### B. Uncompensated Transient Response

A large external capacitor is used on conventional LDO regulators and linear regulators in general to improve the transient load regulation. The output capacitor  $C_{out}$  in the range of nanofarad–microfarad in Fig. 4(a) stores potential energy proportional to the output voltage, and it can deliver the required instantaneous current giving some time for the regulating loop to react and provide the required output current through the pass transistor. For a pulsed output current of 0 to  $I_{MAX}$ , the transfer of charge from the capacitor to the load corresponds to a voltage drop  $\Delta V_{out}$  at the output node. If the LDO's loop is slower than the load transient, the pass transistor gate voltage can be assumed constant throughout the load transient. The circuit diagram of Fig. 4(b) models  $M_p$  and its controlling circuitry as a

constant current source. The maximum peaking occurs when the initial current of  $M_p$  is 0, and the load current suddenly changes from 0 to  $I_{max}$ ; for this case, the maximum output voltage variation  $\Delta V_{out}$  is approximately determined by

$$\Delta V_{out} \cong \frac{I_{max} \cdot \Delta t}{C_{out}}. \quad (3)$$

In this expression,  $\Delta t$  is the time required by the loop to react. Thus, the changes in output voltage are inversely proportional to  $C_{out}$ ; the output voltage ripple for a given load transient is reduced by increasing the output capacitance. This side effect becomes more apparent when the load transients are much faster than the loop's gain-bandwidth product, which is usually the case resulting in peak voltages greater than 100 mV.

### III. PROPOSED LDO REGULATOR ARCHITECTURE

For the design of an external capacitorless LDO regulator, there are the following two major design considerations: 1) small over/under shoots during transients and 2) the regulator's stability. To solve these issues, a compensating left-hand plane (LHP) zero is introduced.

The properties of the Miller amplifier have been exploited for the stabilization of multistage amplifiers; the downside of that technique is the generation of an RHP zero [6]. Some techniques reporting the elimination of that zero have been used for long time; a technique based on the approach reported in [7] is used here for LDO's stabilization.

#### A. Transient Response Compensation

In the off-chip capacitorless LDO voltage regulator, the relatively small and load-dependant on-chip output capacitor  $C_{out}$  cannot be used to create the dominant pole since the output pole must reside at high frequency. Thus, the dominant pole must be placed within the error amplifier control loop, and transient control signal must propagate through an internal dominant pole before or at the gate of the pass transistor. Overall transistor gate ca-

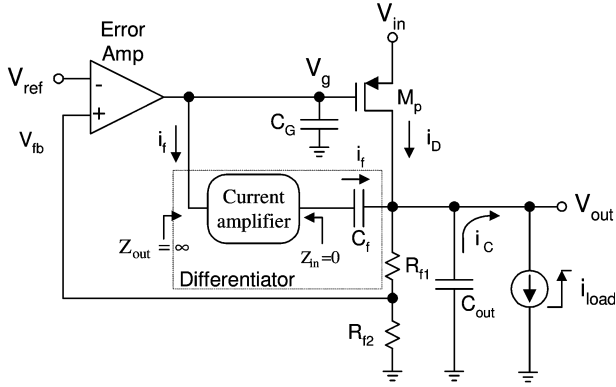


Fig. 5. Proposed LDO topology including a differentiator for fast transient path: basic concept.

capacitance  $C_G \approx C_{GS} + A_{\text{Pass}} C_{GD} + C_1$  in Fig. 2(a)] and output resistance of the error amplifier  $R_1$  act as a current-to-voltage converter, and thus, has an equivalent propagation delay proportional to  $R_1 C_G$ ; **the larger the gate capacitance is, the larger the propagation delay will be.** When a step output current occurs, the pass transistor can only supply the desired current to the load when the gate voltage  $V_g$  moves close enough to its steady state after some time delay  $t_p$ . Since the error amplifier's parasitic poles are placed at high frequencies (time delay associated with these poles is small), the speed of the LDO voltage regulator is mainly determined by the pass transistor propagation delay  $t_p$  determined by  $g_{m_{\text{error}}}/C_G$ , where  $g_{m_{\text{error}}}$  is the small signal transconductance of the error amplifier. Since the ground current must be minimized in on-chip LDO voltage regulator, the value of  $g_{m_{\text{error}}}$  is limited; therefore, a circuit is needed that improves the speed of charging the gate of the pass transistor.

An auxiliary fast loop (differentiator), as shown in Fig. 5, compensates for these issues and constitutes the core of the proposed LDO regulator. **The differentiator forms the backbone of the architecture providing both a fast transient detector path as well as internal ac compensation.** The simplest coupling network might be a unity gain current buffer.  $C_f$  senses the changes in the output voltage in the form of a current  $i_f$ . The current is then injected into pass transistor gate capacitance by means of the coupling network. The compensating circuitry splits the poles, similarly to the regular Miller compensating scheme, and improves loop speed at the same time. Assuming that load current step  $\Delta I_{\text{LOAD}}$  is applied to the LDO, an output ripple  $\Delta V_{\text{OUT}}$  is generated; the current flowing through  $C_f$  is extracted from  $C_g$  until the point in which the  $M_P$ 's drain current compensates  $\Delta I_{\text{LOAD}}$  and allows  $V_{\text{out}}$  to return back to its steady state. **The amount of required coupling capacitance to minimize the output ripple** can be analyzed using the circuit in Fig. 5. If the current flowing through  $R_{f1}$  and  $R_{f2}$  is ignored, the gate variation of the pass transistor to compensate for  $\Delta I_{\text{LOAD}}$  corresponds to

$$\Delta I_{\text{LOAD}} = (\Delta V_g) g_{m_p} \approx \left( \frac{C_f \Delta V_{\text{OUT}}}{C_g} \right) g_{m_p}. \quad (4)$$

More detailed analysis shows that this is a pessimistic case since both the output current of the error amplifier and  $C_{gd}$  increase the amount of compensating current injected into  $C_G$ ;  $C_{\text{out}}$  also helps in reducing the output ripple.

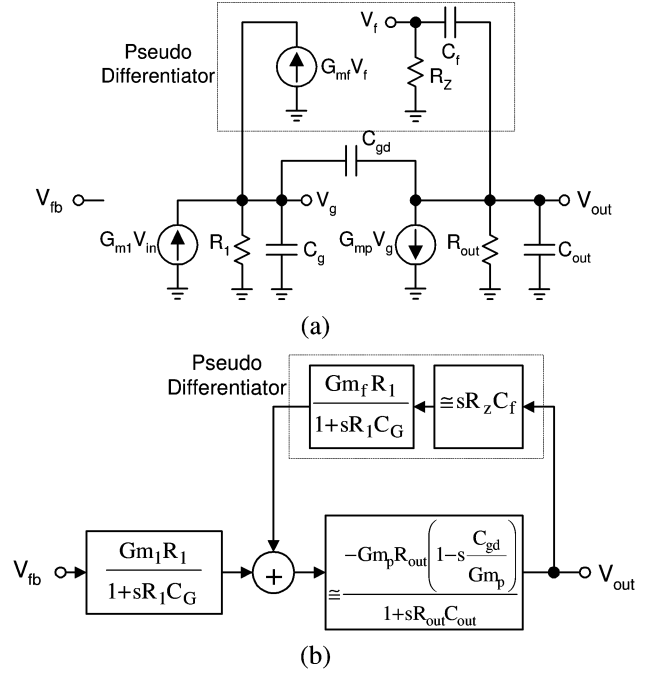


Fig. 6. External capacitorless LDO topology using a pseudodifferentiator. (a) Simplified schematic. (b) Equivalent block diagram ignoring the Miller effect.

For a current step of 0–50 mA and a maximum output ripple of 100 mV, and assuming that  $G_{m_p} = 10$  mA/V and  $C_G = 50$  pF, the compensating capacitance  $C_f$  becomes in the order of  $50 \cdot C_G = 2.5$  nF; fortunately,  $C_{gd}$  helps in pushing the gate of the pass transistor into the proper direction. **The amount of coupling needed to maintain small output ripple changes with load current with the worst case scenario corresponding to the no-load condition or smallest  $G_{m_p}$ .** Thus, the transient operation going from low to high load currents requires the most coupling capacitance.

Clearly, the required coupling capacitor is too large to be integrated. A technique is proposed to decrease the size of  $C_f$  while maintaining the effective coupling capacitance required by (4). For the analysis of the proposed circuit, let us consider the simplified open-loop characteristics of the LDO's compensation scheme shown in Fig. 6(a). If the impedance of the resistor is small compared with that of the  $C_f$ , the capacitive current is converted to voltage by  $R_Z$ , and converted back into current by  $G_{m_f}$ . **The auxiliary circuit designated as the pseudo-differentiator increases the effect of  $C_f$  as follows:**

$$C_{f,\text{eff}} = G_{m_f} R_Z \cdot C_f. \quad (5)$$

**In this expression, it is assumed that the parasitic pole at  $1/R_Z C_f$  is located at very high frequency.** The use of  $G_{m_f}$  provides two benefits:  $C_f$  can be reduced by several magnitudes due to the effect of  $G_{m_f} R_Z$  and the feedforward path created by  $C_f$  is eliminated.

Fig. 7 shows the improvement for a full-load transient response using the proposed differentiator compensation which yields approximately a 10 $\times$  reduction in undershoot. (Note that the uncompensated simulation used a very large capacitor at the error amplifier output to create the dominant pole.)

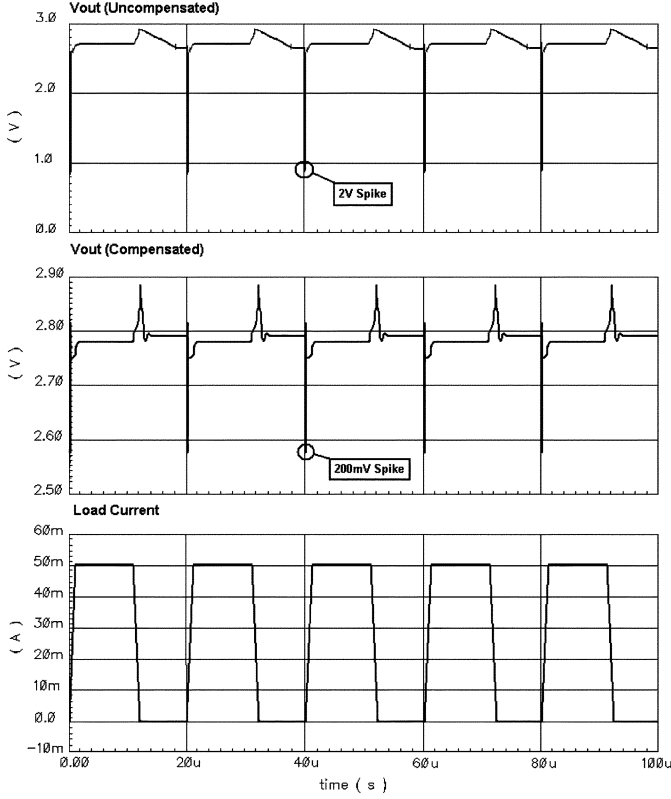


Fig. 7. Simulated improvement of transient response using proposed differentiator compensation.

### B. The ac Stability

The topology's transfer function can be obtained by using the block diagram representation shown in Fig. 6(b). The differentiator's parasitic pole at  $1/R_Z C_f$  is ignored in this expression since by design it will be placed well above the loop's unity gain frequency; it is also assumed that the Miller capacitance is accounted in  $C_G \cong C_{gs} + A_{Pass} C_{GD}$ . By using standard circuit's analysis methods, the open-loop transfer function is obtained as

$$\frac{v_{out}}{v_{fb}} = - \frac{(G_{m1} R_1) \cdot (G_{mP} R_{out}) \left(1 - s \frac{C_{gd}}{G_{mP}}\right)}{\left[ (1 + s R_1 C_G)(1 + s R_{out} C_{out}) + (s R_Z C_f (G_{mF} R_1 G_{mP} R_{out})) \left(1 - s \frac{C_{gd}}{G_{mP}}\right) \right]}. \quad (6)$$

Equation (6) sheds light on the ideal effect of the differentiator and the use of a quasi-Miller compensation. The location of the poles and zero can be simplified by assuming that  $C_f R_Z G_{mF} R_1 G_{mP} R_{out} \gg C_{out} R_{out1} + C_G R_1$ , yielding

$$\begin{aligned} \omega_{P_{dom}} &\cong - \frac{1}{R_1 G_{mP} R_{out} (G_{mF} R_Z C_f)} \\ \omega_{P2} &\cong - \frac{G_{mP} (G_{mF} R_Z C_f)}{C_{out} C_G} \\ \omega_{Z1} &= + \frac{G_{mP}}{C_{gd}}. \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

As expected, the differentiator splits the poles located at the input and output of the pass transistor, but it does not affect the location of the RHP zero. High-coupling network gain  $G_{mF} R_Z$

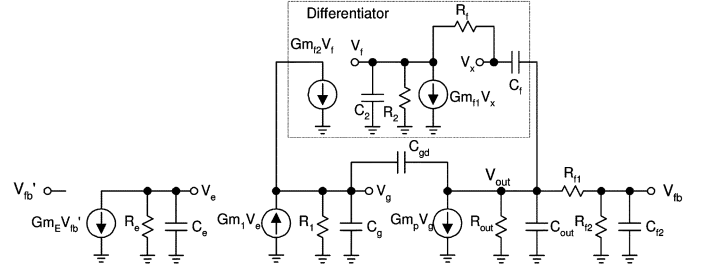


Fig. 8. Small signal diagram of the proposed capacitorless LDO voltage regulator: open-loop schematic.

ensures sufficient distance between the two poles to yield stable LDO operation. It is worth mentioning that the RHP zero may attract the poles to the right-hand side of the S-plane and generates negative root locus trajectories [9].

The loop macromodel of the complete solution is shown in Fig. 8. The differentiator is modified from Fig. 6 to reflect the final transistor-level implementation; it adds a second error amplifier stage  $G_{mE}$ . The compensating circuit is composed by the differentiator ( $C_f$ ,  $R_f$ ,<sup>1</sup> and  $G_{mF1}$ ) and an additional transconductance amplifier  $G_{mF2}$  to boost the feedback gain, resulting in higher equivalent capacitance  $C_{f,eff} (\approx G_{mF2} R_f C_f)$ . In this case, the LDO's loop includes the feedback resistors  $R_{f1}$  and  $R_{f2}$  and its parasitics. Unfortunately, the differentiator contains parasitic poles at nodes  $V_x (\omega_{PD1})$  and  $V_r (\omega_{PD2})$  that affect the overall behavior of the ac stability; they are approximately placed at the following locations:

$$\omega_{PD1,2} \cong - \frac{1 \pm \sqrt{1 - 4 \frac{G_{mF1} R_f C_2}{C_f \left(1 + \frac{R_f}{R_2}\right)^2}}}{2(R_2 \parallel R_f) \left(\frac{C_2 C_f}{C_2 + C_f}\right)}. \quad (8a)$$

If  $C_f \gg C_2$ , the poles are real and they are approximately located at

$$\omega_{PD1} \approx - \frac{G_{mF1} R_2}{C_f \cdot (R_f + R_2)} \quad \omega_{PD2} \approx - \frac{1}{C_2 (R_2 \parallel R_f)}. \quad (8b)$$

A typical bode plot for the standalone differentiator is shown in Fig. 9; usually,  $\omega_{PD1} \ll \omega_{PD2}$  because the relatively large compensating capacitor  $C_f$  used.  $\omega_{PD1}$  and  $\omega_{PD2}$  have an adverse effect when the loop containing both the differentiator and the pass transistor stage is closed.

Notice in Fig. 8 that the loop that includes the differentiator has five poles if the pole at  $V_{fb}$  terminal is included in the analysis. The loop is reduced to a third order if  $\omega_{PD2}$  and the pole at  $V_{fb}$  are ignored. In that case, Cardano's method [8] can be used to show that  $\omega_{PD1}$  (lowest frequency differentiator pole) and the pole at  $V_{out}$  turn into a complex pole pair—denoted hereafter as  $P'_2$  and  $P'_3$ —when the differentiator's loop is analyzed. The magnitude of resulting complex conjugate pole pair can be found as

$$P'_2, P'_3 > \sqrt{\omega_{PD1} \omega_{P2}} \quad (9)$$

<sup>1</sup> $R_f$  refers to the differentiator's series feedback resistance while  $R_Z$  denotes the differentiator's ground referenced input resistance.



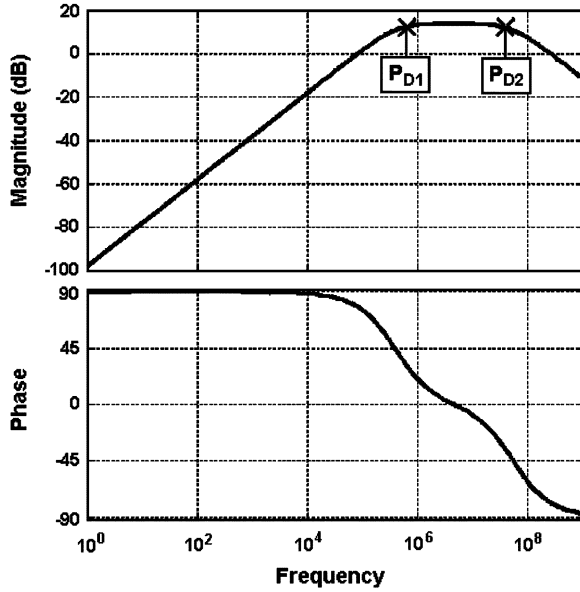


Fig. 9. Differentiator's magnitude and phase response.

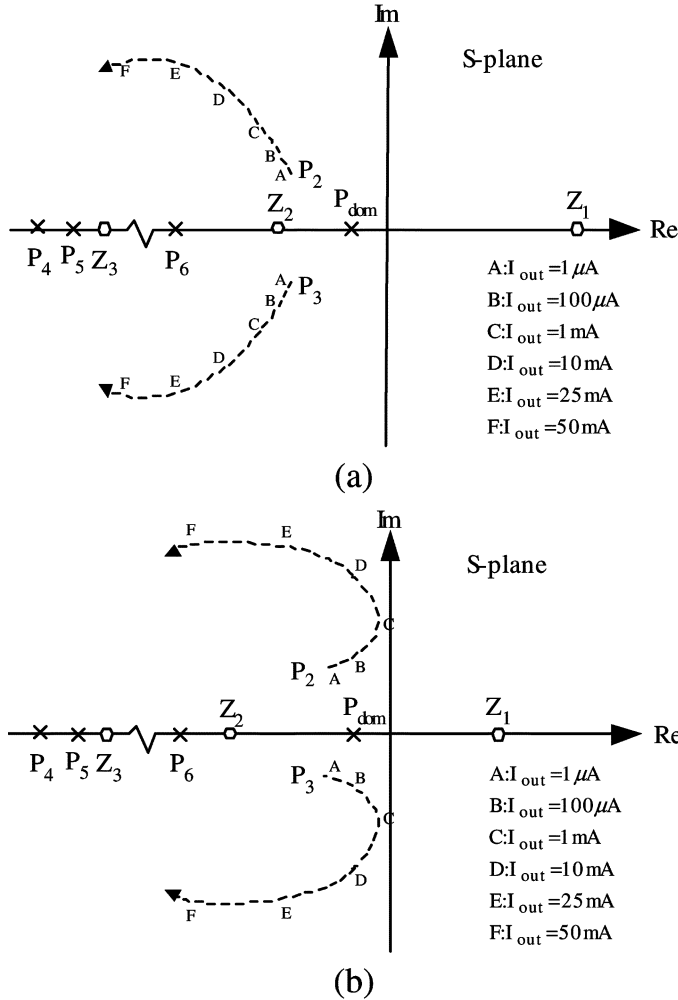
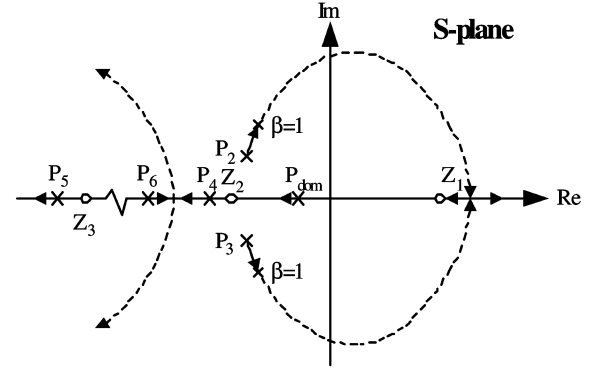
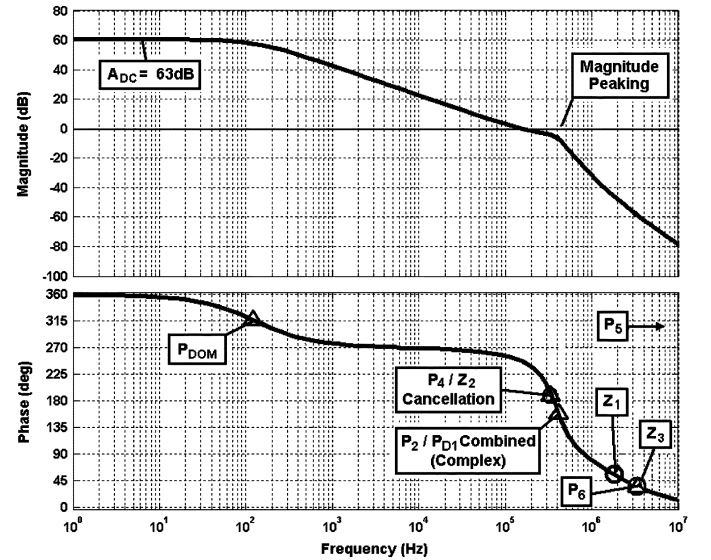


Fig. 10. Differentiator parasitic pole effects on complex pole movement versus load current: (a) desired pole trajectory and (b) potential instability (S-plane not to scale).

where  $\omega_{PD1}$  and  $\omega_{P2}$  are given in (7) and (8b). To get some insight on the reason for the complex poles, let us assume that

Fig. 11. Complete capacitorless LDO regulator root-locus diagram for feedback gain  $\beta$  and  $I_{OUT} = 0$  mA.Fig. 12. Open-loop ac response for  $I_{OUT} = 0$  mA.

the dominant pole at node  $V_g$  is located at very low frequency, and that the differentiator has a dominant pole  $\omega_{PD1}$ . When the differentiator's loop is analyzed, the dominant pole and the zero due to the differentiator cancel each other leading to the classic two-pole loop: Main poles are at nodes  $V_{out}$  and  $\omega_{PD1}$ . The additional loop gain due to  $g_{mf2}$  increases the effective frequency of the complex poles. The presence of the RHP zero due to  $C_{gd}$  as well as the effect of other parasitic poles makes the poles complex.

In addition to the aforementioned poles, we still have to consider the dominant pole  $\omega_{P_{dom}}$  given in (7), the poles at  $V_f$  ( $\omega_{PD2}$ ), pole  $P_4$  at node  $V_{fb}$ ,  $P_5$  at node  $V_f$ , and  $P_6$  at node  $V_e$ . The location of the last poles are

$$\begin{aligned}\omega_{P4} &= -\frac{1}{(R_{f1}||R_{f2})C_{f2}} \\ \omega_{P5} &\cong -\frac{1}{C_2(R_2||R_f)} \\ \omega_{P6} &= -\frac{1}{R_e C_e}.\end{aligned}\quad (10)$$

Also, an RHP zero  $Z_1$  due to  $C_{gd}$  and a couple of real LHP zeros  $Z_2$  and  $Z_3$  with frequencies close to  $\omega_{PD1}$  and  $\omega_{PD2}$ ,

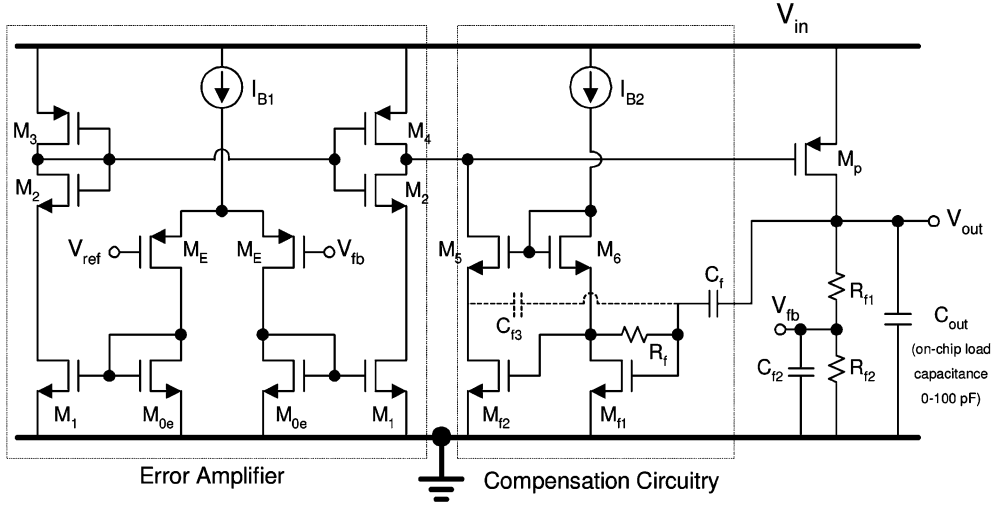


Fig. 13. Transistor-level implementation of the proposed LDO's architecture.

respectively, appear into the system since these poles are not touching the main trajectory from  $V'_{fb}$  to  $V_{fb}$ .

The relevant poles and zeros present in Fig. 8 are depicted in Fig. 10(a); there are three real poles, two complex poles, and three zeros; this figure also shows the desired complex pole placement as a function of the load current. Unfortunately, at some critical conditions for the parasitic poles and zeros, shown in Fig. 10(b), the complex poles might even cross to the RHP and the system becomes conditionally stable.

Note in these results that the RHZ  $Z_1$  has a strong effect on loop's stability since it may attract the complex poles. The condition for stability can be found using again Cardano's method, but the resulting expression is quite complex. It is, however, enough to have enough phase margin ( $>45^\circ$ )

$$\frac{1}{2|\omega_{PD1,2}|} + \frac{1}{\omega_{P5}} + \frac{1}{|\omega_{Z1}|} < \frac{1}{A_{loop}\omega_{Pdom}} \cong \frac{1}{GBW} \quad (11)$$

where  $A_{loop}(= \beta G_{m_e} R_e G_{m_1} R_1 G_{m_p} R_{out})$  is the dc loop gain and GBW is the gain-bandwidth product. It is assume in this expression that the two LHP zeros are placed beyond GBW and close enough to  $\omega_{P4}$  and  $\omega_{P6}$ . Note in (11) that the RHP zero  $\omega_{Z1}$  has a strong effect on loop's stability; the higher its frequency the better the loop's stability is. As aforementioned, it is advisable to place the complex poles such that  $|\omega_{PD1,2}| > 5-10$  times GBW to have enough gain margin to tolerate the peaking introduced (usually, less than 6 dB) by the complex poles.

Usually, the LHP zeros would improve system stability by adding positive phase; however, a downside is that they may reduce loop gain margin if located close to the unity gain frequency, and in conjunction with magnitude peaking and sharp phase transition induced by the complex conjugate and high frequency poles, it may significantly reduces system stability. To minimize this issue, the additional capacitor  $C_{f2}$  shown in Fig. 8 was added to push down  $\omega_{P4}$  (pole at node  $V_{fb}$ ) to cancel the effects of  $Z_2$ .  $P4$  is chosen since it does not affect the integrator's loop stability and can be easily controlled. The complete root-locus for the critical case of  $I_{OUT} = 0$  is shown

in Fig. 11; it contains the differentiator, a compensating capacitor  $C_{f2}$  (shown in Fig. 8 and to be discussed in the following section) and the dc stabilizing feedback network  $\beta = R_{f2}/(R_{f1} + R_{f2})$ . Due to the number of poles and zeros, as expected, the complex poles are attracted to the RHP by  $Z_1$ ; however, the resulting closed-loop poles movement is very small for  $\beta \leq 1$ , and the overall closed-loop complex poles will lie in left-hand side of the S-plane for the practical feedback gain range  $\beta$ , provided that (11) is satisfied. Notice that  $P5$  resides at very high frequency not affecting significantly system stability.

The loop has been extensively simulated under different PVT variations. The ac compensated capacitorless LDO regulator has a Bode plot that resembles a first-order transfer function up to the complex conjugate pole pair; shown in Fig. 12 is the most critical case. The ac stability involves the following three essential requirements: 1) the complex pole pair does not cross into the RHP, 2) the magnitude peaking of the complex conjugate pair does not peak over the 0-dB threshold (adequate gain margin), and 3) adequate phase margin.

#### IV. PROPOSED LDO TRANSISTOR-LEVEL DESIGN

The transistor-level design is shown in Fig. 13. A three-current mirror operational transconductance amplifier  $M_0-M_3$  and  $M_E$  forms the error amplifier. The low-impedance internal nodes of the three-current mirror operational transconductance amplifier (OTA) drive the parasitic poles out to high frequencies, well pass the desired GBW product. The error amplifier's parasitic poles do not significantly affect the performance of the regulator as long as they are at least three times greater than the loop's GBW product, and the error amplifier can, therefore, be designed to meet other desired parameters such as the output noise, power consumption, and dc gain [3]–[5].

##### A. Design Considerations

The dc gain is the major stability constraint on the error amplifier, forced by the desired gain margin or the magnitude difference between the worst case complex pole magnitude peak and unity gain frequency. This gain margin is a function of load

TABLE II  
DESIGN PARAMETER VALUES

	W( $\mu\text{m}$ )	L( $\mu\text{m}$ )	I <sub>p</sub> ( $\mu\text{A}$ )
M <sub>E</sub>	20	2	2.5
M <sub>0e</sub>	1	2	2.5
M <sub>1</sub>	2	2	5
M <sub>2</sub>	5	2	5
M <sub>3</sub>	2.9	2	5
M <sub>4</sub>	20.3	2	35
M <sub>5</sub> , M <sub>f2</sub>	3	0.4	30
M <sub>6</sub> , M <sub>f1</sub>	1	0.4	10
M <sub>p</sub>	16000	0.4	10

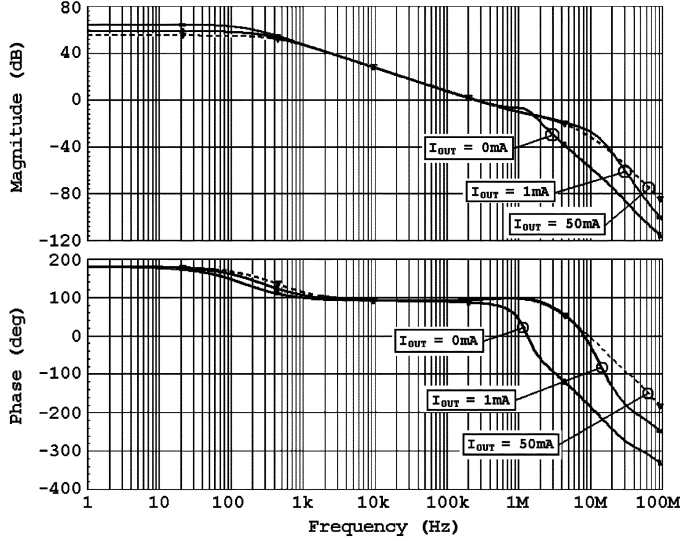


Fig. 14. Full range open-loop ac response spice simulation (0–50 mA).

current, and retains its lowest value in the load current range of 0 to 5 mA. The error amplifier gain ranges between 40 and 50 dB.

The differentiator is designed to yield the desired transient response while stabilizing the overall system transfer function. The input and output nodes of  $M_{gmf1}$ , forming the first stage amplifier in the inverting differentiator, are the most critical nodes. Enough gain must be developed to properly drive the differentiation capacitor while generating very small parasitic capacitors. This pushes the generated poles  $\omega_{PD1}$  and  $\omega_{PD2}$  to higher frequencies. Thus, the tradeoff between stability and transient response remains the most difficult design problem, and several iterations of the design procedure are required.  $R_f$  performs three tasks: transforms the current supplied by  $C_f$  into a voltage during load current transients, provides the dc bias for both  $M_{f1}$  and  $M_{f2}$ , and helps to lower the differentiator's input impedance pushing the associated pole  $\omega_{PD1}$  beyond the loop's unity gain frequency. The inverting differentiator then sums into the error amplifier output through transistors  $M_{f2}$  and  $M_4$ . Compensation capacitor  $C_{f3}$  in the range of 1–2 pF, is used to improve the ac stability.  $C_{f3}$  uses the Miller effect to push the pole at the input of the differentiator  $\omega_{PD1}$  out to higher frequencies; notice in Fig. 13 that it is placed in partial positive feedback.

Inaccuracies and mismatches will cause large dc offsets at the output.  $M_2$  and  $M_{5-6}$  transistors are added to reduce the systematic offsets and to increase the current mirror accuracy as  $V_{IN}$  increases. The design starts with the required dropout

TABLE III  
CIRCUIT DIMENSIONS AND BIAS:  $V_{REF} = 1.24$  V,  $R_{F1} = 156$  k $\Omega$ ,  $R_{F2} = 124$  k $\Omega$ ,  $I_{B1} = 5$   $\mu\text{A}$ ,  $I_{B2} = 10$   $\mu\text{A}$

Parameter	Final value
Pass transistor	$C_{GS} \approx 100$ pF, $C_{GD} \approx 26$ pF, $G_{m_p} = 3.20$ mA/V @ $I_{OUT} = 0$ mA
$C_{out}^*$	100 pF
$R_{out}$	280 k $\Omega$
$A_{diff}$	$\sim 60$ dB
$C_f$	20 pF
$R_f$	200 k $\Omega$
$G_{m_f2} \cdot R_2$	$\sim 30$ dB
$A_{DC}$	$\leq 68$ dB
$G_{m_f2} R_{f2}$ , $G_{m_f1} R_{f1}$	$\sim 40$ dB
$C_{f2}$	1 pF
$C_{f3}$ (optional)	2 pF

\*Load capacitor  $C_{out}$  is added to test the circuit under large capacitive load conditions.

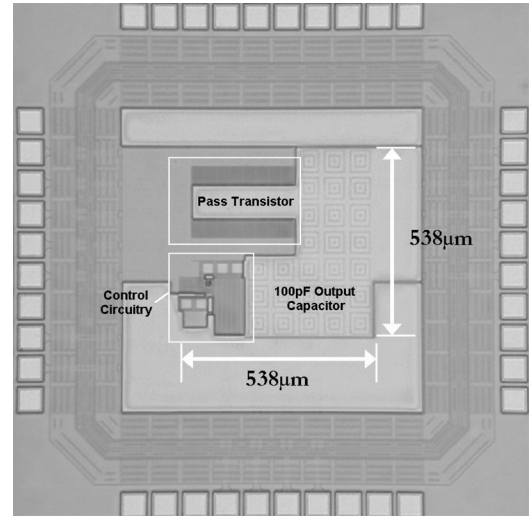


Fig. 15. Microphotograph of the chip.

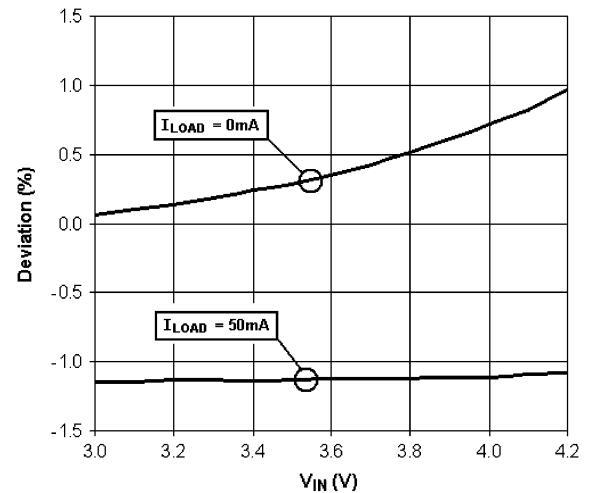
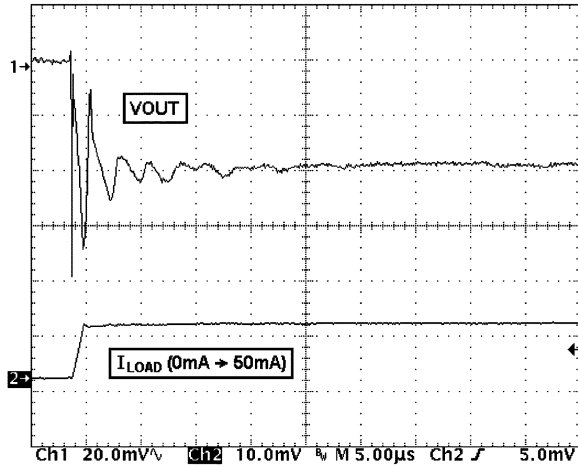


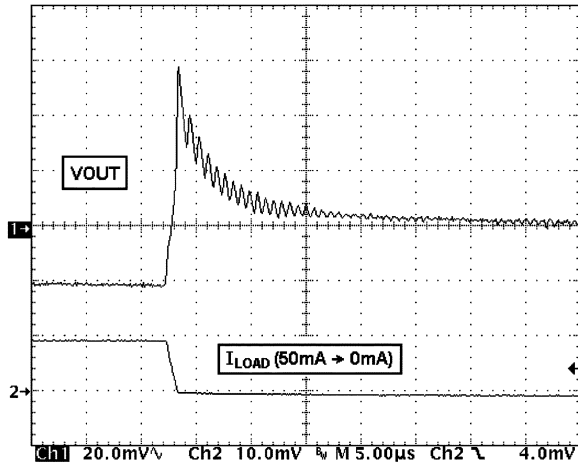
Fig. 16. Measured line and load regulation.

voltage  $V_{DROP}$ , and the maximum current at dropout  $I_{MAX}$ , which define the parameters of the pass transistor. The procedure then defines the differentiator parameters, followed by the error amplifier parameters, and ends with the selection of  $C_{f2}$  and  $C_{f3}$ . The final circuit parameters are given in Table II with a

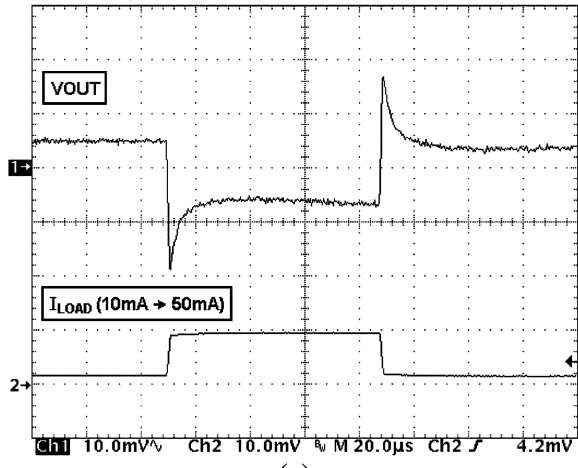




(a)



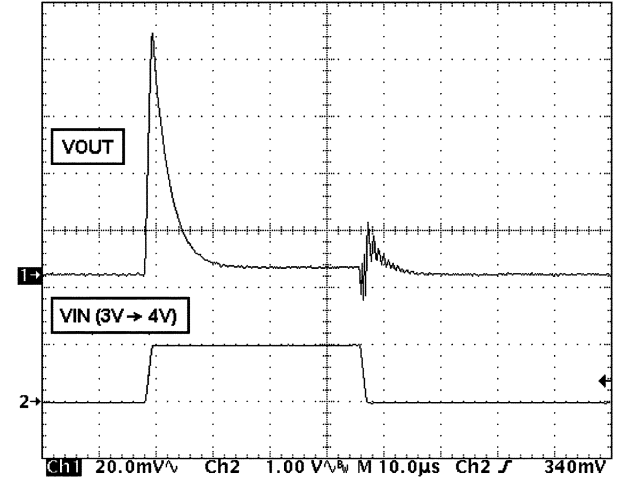
(b)



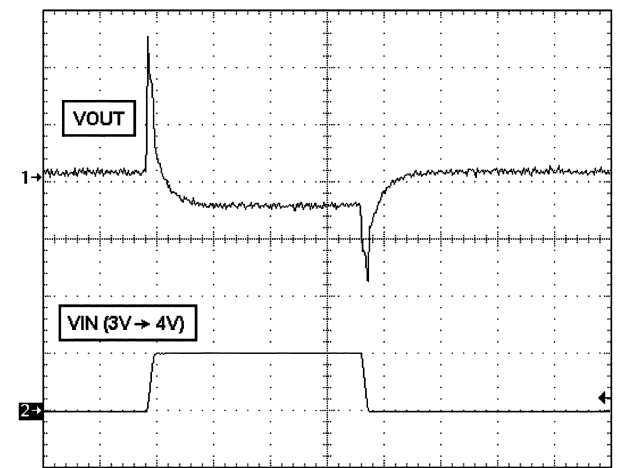
(c)

Fig. 17. Measured transient response: (a) 0–50 mA, (b) 50–0 mA, (c) 10–50 mA to 10 mA.

spice simulated open-loop ac response for three cases shown in Fig. 14. The final capacitorless LDO design had full range stability with a GBW product of greater than 220 kHz and phase margin exceeding  $50^\circ$  over temperature ( $-40^\circ\text{C}$  to  $80^\circ\text{C}$ ) and process tolerances ( $3\sigma$  yields with  $\pm 10\%$  variations for all parameters). For smaller  $C_{\text{load}}$ , the unity gain frequency increases and circuit's stability improves.



(a)



(b)

Fig. 18. Measured Line transient response: (a)  $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 0$  mA and (b)  $I_{\text{LOAD}} = 50$  mA.

## V. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

The physical capacitorless LDO voltage regulator was experimentally verified for all simulated parameters except for the open-loop ac response with  $V_{\text{REF}}$  set to 1.24 V and  $V_{\text{IN}}$  set to 3 V minimum, unless otherwise noted. The circuit was fabricated, through the MOSIS educational program, in the TSMC  $0.35\text{-}\mu\text{m}$  CMOS technology that occupied  $0.29\text{ mm}^2$  of area and consumed  $65\text{ }\mu\text{A}$  of ground current. The transistor dimensions and bias conditions are given in Table III.

The chip microphotograph is shown in Fig. 15. An on-chip 100-pF capacitor was included to characterize LDO's performance under extreme conditions. Most of the area is invested in the 100-pF on-chip capacitor and the pass transistor; LDO's area, excluding the load capacitor, is around  $350\text{ }\mu\text{m}^2$ .

The off-chip capacitorless LDO regulator was tested for load and line regulation, shown in Fig. 16. Output voltage errors were less than 1.5% over the entire operation range.

The regulator was then subjected to a 0–50-mA load transient with  $1\text{-}\mu\text{s}$  rise and fall times, as shown in Fig. 17(a) and (b). An extra ringing, less than  $\pm 90\text{ mV}$ , was experienced for the positive load current transition, but the ringing quickly subsided

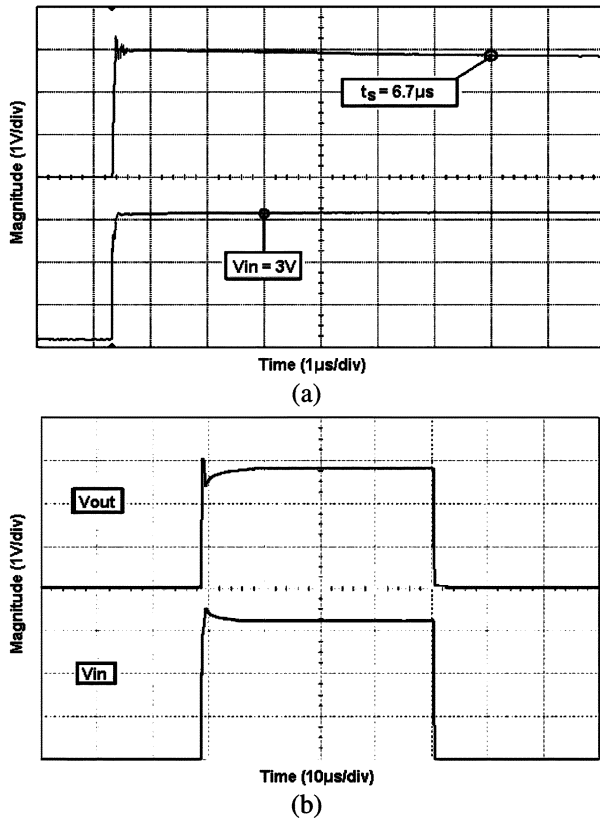


Fig. 19. Measured turn-on response: (a)  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  mA and (b)  $I_{LOAD} = 50$  mA.

and a stable response was reached within  $15 \mu s$  in the worst case. For the 50–0-mA transition in Fig. 17(b), the amplitude of the ringing is smaller and settling time is also approximately  $15 \mu s$ . The output voltage ringing is greatly reduced when operating above 1 mA or outside the pass transistor subthreshold region; it was experimentally found in Fig. 17(c) that for a load transient of 10–50 mA with the same rise and fall times, the overshoots are approximately  $\pm 10$  mV. It can also be noticed in this plot that the output voltage presents an output voltage variation, steady state, of 11 mV when the load current changes from 10 to 50 mA. This value confirms that the overall loop transconductance is stable with an equivalent output resistance close to  $40 \text{ mV}/50 \text{ mA} > 0.8 \Omega$ . The line transient response was measured for a 3–4-V step waveform with  $1\text{-}\mu s$  transition times for both  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  mA [Fig. 18(a)] and  $I_{LOAD} = 50$  mA [Fig. 18(b)]. Output voltage variation was less than 90 mV for  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  mA and less than 15 mV for  $I_{LOAD} = 50$  mA. A positive input voltage transient produces larger spikes since the output capacitance is easier to charge than discharge due to the quadratic current–voltage ( $I$ – $V$ ) characteristics of the pass transistor.

The turn-on settling response was measured for various loading conditions; Fig. 19(a) shows the time response for a no-load condition, measuring roughly  $8 \mu s$  for a 0.1% settling time specification. The turn-on response for 50 mA shown in Fig. 19(b) is less than  $10 \mu s$ . Fig. 20(a) shows the power supply rejection ratio (PSRR) for  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  and 50 mA. Tests revealed a PSRR response smaller than  $-53$  dB for frequencies up to 100 kHz. PSRR is a function of the pass transistor  $R_{DS}$

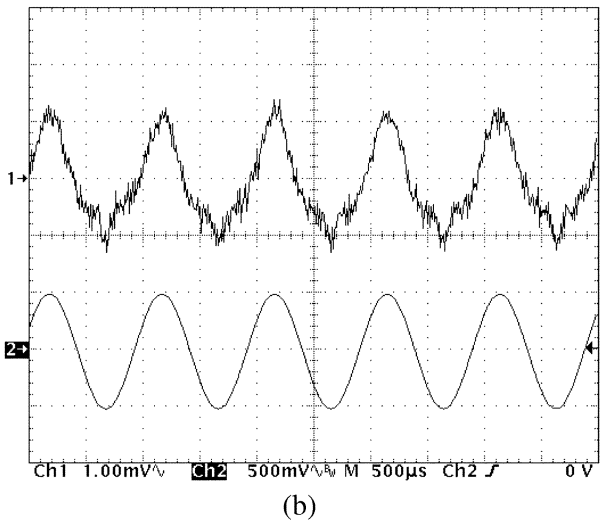
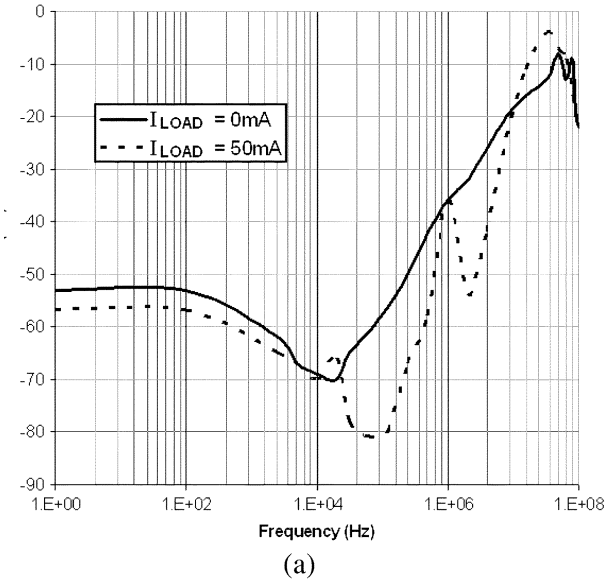


Fig. 20. Measured PSRR: (a) PSRR for  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  and 50 mA, (b) Ripple response  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  mA.  $V_{out}$  and  $V_{in}$  are depicted in trace 1 and 2, respectively.

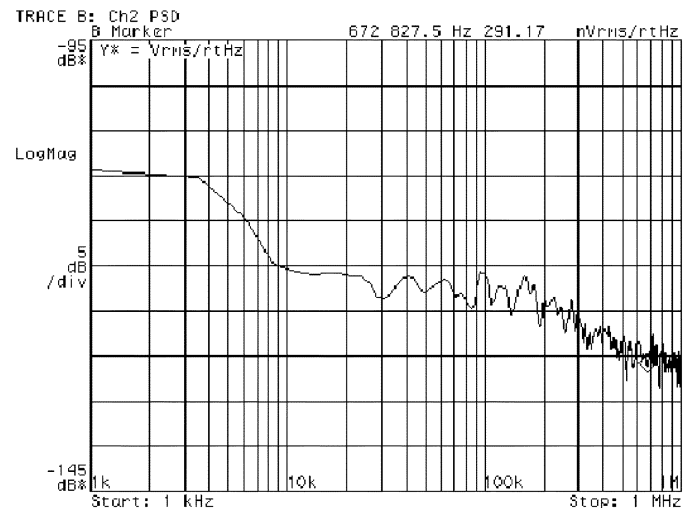


Fig. 21. Output noise for  $I_{LOAD} = 0$  mA.

and the error amplifier PSRR at the pass transistor's gate. The transient response, shown in Fig. 20(b), was measured

TABLE IV  
COMPARISON OF RESULTS

Parameter		[2]*	[10]	[11]**	This work***
Technology		CMOS 0.6μm	CMOS 0.09μm	BiCMOS	CMOS 0.35μm
Pass Element		Common-Source	Composite	Common-Drain	Common-Source
I <sub>MAX</sub> (mA)		100	100	150	50
V <sub>OUT</sub>		1.3	0.9	1.2 – 5.5	2.8
V <sub>DROP</sub> (mV)		200	300	30	200
I <sub>Q</sub> (mA)		0.038	6	0.55	0.065
C <sub>out</sub> (pF)		10,000 (external)	600 (external)	0 - 10,000	0-100
Area (mm <sup>2</sup> )		0.307	0.098	NA	0.12
Δv <sub>out</sub> (Full load transient)		< 150mV	90mV	< 120 mV @ C <sub>Load</sub> =0pF and I <sub>load</sub> 10mA-150 mA	< 90mV @C <sub>Load</sub> =100pF
Settling (μs)		~ 2 (0-100 mA)	N/A	~ 20 (10mA-150 mA)	~ 15 (0-50 mA)
PSRR (1kHz)		- 60 dB	N/A	~ - 45 dB	-57 dB
Loop gain (dB)		90 ~ 110	>43	NA	55 ~ 62
Noise	@ 100Hz	1.8μV/√Hz	NA	0.45 μV/√Hz	4.6μV/√Hz
	@ 100kHz	0.38μV/√Hz	NA	0.2 μV/√Hz	0.63 μV/√Hz

\* $\Delta v_{out}$  and settling time are not provided for  $C_{out}=0$  pF ( $C_{internal} = 12$  pF) and  $I_{step}= 0$ -100 mA.

\*\* Uses a charge pump to handle the common drain device.

\*\*\* The on-chip capacitance needed consists of  $C_f$ ,  $C_{f1}$  and  $C_{f2}$ ;  $C_{f3}$  is optional.

to verify the PSRR results. A sinusoidal waveform of 1 kHz was applied to  $V_{IN}$  and the supply voltage gain was measured around  $-53$  dB. The equivalent output noise was measured for different load currents, as shown in Fig. 21. The worst case spot noise at 10 kHz was roughly  $720$  nV/Hz<sup>1/2</sup> and was mainly due to  $1/f$  noise. The error amplifier contributed to most of the noise and has to be optimized to reduce the equivalent output noise if required.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Experimental results show that the proposed LDO voltage regulator exceeds current work in the area of external capacitorless LDO regulators in both transient response and ac stability while consuming only  $65$   $\mu$ A of quiescent current; the internal compensating capacitors are as small as  $7$  pF only while the load capacitor can be as large as  $100$  pF.

Stability is not compromised by the load capacitance value, provided that  $C_{load}$  does not exceed some limits defined by the location of the second pole. A comparison is made among other output capacitorless designs [2], [10], [11], shown in Table IV, illustrating the significance of the proposed external capacitorless LDO regulator. Not only does the proposed regulator consume low power, but it provides a low dropout voltage and fast settling time. SoC designs would benefit from the reduced board real estate, pin count, and cost achievable with the proposed off-chip capacitorless full CMOS LDO regulator.

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**Robert J. Milliken** was born in Marshalltown, IA, on September 5, 1979. He received the B.S. degree in electrical engineering from Iowa State University, Ames, in 2002 and the M.S. degree in electrical engineering from Texas A&M University, College Station, in 2005.

In summer 2005, he joined Linear Technology, Colorado Springs, CO, where he is currently designing BiCMOS mixed-signal ICs for switch-mode power converters.



**Jose Silva-Martínez** (SM'98) was born in Tecamachalco, Puebla, México. He received the M.Sc. degree from the Instituto Nacional de Astrofísica Óptica y Electrónica (INAOE), Puebla, México, in 1981, and the Ph.D. degree from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium in 1992.

In 1983, he joined the Department of Electrical Engineering, Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Puebla, México, where he remained until 1993. He pioneered the graduate program on optoelectronics in 1992. In 1993, he rejoined the Electronics Depart-

ment, INAOE, and from May 1995 to December 1998, was the Head of the Electronics Department. He was a Cofounder of the Ph.D. program on electronics in 1993. Currently, he is with the Department of Electrical Engineering (Analog and Mixed Signal Center), Texas A&M University, College Station, where he is an Associate Professor. His current field of research is in the design and fabrication of integrated circuits for communication and biomedical application.

Dr. Silva-Martínez has served as the IEEE Circuits and Systems Society (CASS) Vice President region 9 (1997–1998) and an Associate Editor for the IEEE TRANSACTIONS ON CIRCUITS AND SYSTEMS—II: ANALOG AND DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSING from 1997–1998 and May 2002–December 2003. Since January 2004, he has been an Associate Editor of the IEEE TRANSACTIONS ON CIRCUITS AND SYSTEMS—I: FUNDAMENTAL THEORY AND APPLICATIONS. He was the main organizer of the 1998 and 1999 International IEEE-CAS Tour in region 9 and Chairman of the International Workshop on Mixed-Mode IC Design and Applications (1997–1999). He is the inaugural holder of the TI Professorship-I in analog engineering, Texas A&M University, and the recipient of the 2005 Outstanding Professor Award by the ECE Department, Texas A&M University. He was a corecipient of the 1990 European Solid-State Circuits Conference Best Paper Award.



**Edgar Sánchez-Sinencio** (F'92) was born in Mexico City, Mexico. He received the degree in communications and electronic engineering (professional degree) from the National Polytechnic Institute of Mexico, Mexico City, the M.S.E.E. degree from Stanford University, CA, and the Ph.D. degree from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, in 1966, 1970, and 1973, respectively. In November 1995, he was awarded an Honoris Causa Doctorate by the National Institute for Astrophysics, Optics and Electronics, Mexico, the first honorary degree

awarded for microelectronic circuit design contributions.

Currently, he is the "TI" J. Kilby Chair Professor and Director of the Analog and Mixed-Signal Center, Texas A&M University, College Station. He is the Coauthor of the books *Switched Capacitor Circuits* (Van Nostrand: New York, 1984) and *CMOS PLL Synthesizers* (Springer-Verlag: New York, 2005) and Coeditor of the book *Low Voltage/Low-Power Integrated Circuits and Systems* (IEEE Press, 1999). He has nearly 1000 citations reported in the Scientific Citation Index and has graduated more than 22 Ph.D. students and nearly 40 M.Sc. students. His current interests are in the area of RF circuits, organic electronics, and analog and mixed-mode circuit design.

Dr. Sánchez-Sinencio is the former Editor-in-Chief of the IEEE TRANSACTIONS ON CIRCUITS AND SYSTEMS—II: ANALOG AND DIGITAL SIGNAL PROCESSING. He is a corecipient of the 1995 Guillemin–Cauer award for his work on cellular networks. He is a former IEEE Circuits and Systems (CAS) Vice President—Publications. He was also the corecipient of the 1997 Darlington Award for his work on high-frequency filters. He received the IEEE CAS Society Golden Jubilee Medal in 1999. He was a member of the IEEE Solid-State Circuits Society Fellow Award Committee from 2002 to 2004. He was the IEEE Circuits and Systems Society, Representative to the Solid-State Circuits Society (2000–2002). He is currently a member of the IEEE CAS Society Board of Governors.