

# John McCain is No Longer a Maverick

.

## Addendum to Unpredictable Voters in Ideal Point Estimation

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Legislators like Ron Paul, Russell Feingold, William Proxmire, John McCain, and others have historically been labeled “mavericks” in part because they seem to make their voting decisions a bit differently than other legislators. In “Unpredictable Voters in Ideal Point Estimation” (Lauderdale, 2010), I show that a heteroskedastic ideal point estimator (see also Poole, 2001; Poole, 2005) is useful for identifying Congressional mavericks. In that paper, I showed that the estimated degree of legislator-specific heteroskedasticity—the degree to which a legislator does not seem to be simply a liberal, moderate or conservative—seems to closely track existing conceptions of which legislators are mavericks.

The peer review process being what it is, the paper that was ultimately published in the spring of 2010 initially went out for review January 9, 2008. In that two year period, one of

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\*Thanks to John Sides for posting the original paper to the Monkey Cage blog and for asking for this analysis to supplement that already in the paper.

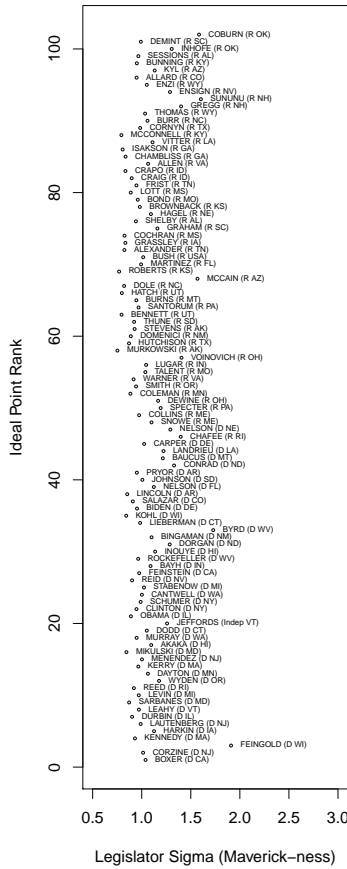
the most famous recent mavericks in the U.S. Senate, John McCain, successfully secured the Republican nomination for President, lost the 2008 election to Barack Obama, and returned to the Senate. In initially writing the paper, I had examined McCain's trend over time. In the last Congress for which I had full data, the 109th (2005-2006), McCain was among the least predictable Senate voters, down somewhat from his peak unpredictability in the 107th Congress (2001-2002). It is important to note that McCain was not a moderate: he did not vote like Olympia Snowe, Arlen Specter, or Susan Collins. When he defected from the party line, he tended to do so on different bills than the party moderates, who tended to defect together. McCain looked like a standard Republican, just one who made more "mistakes" than most others.

But after he lost the election, a few members of the press noted that McCain seemed to have changed. In a blog post "What Happened To John McCain?" on October 2, 2009, Jesse Zwick of The New Republic wrote:

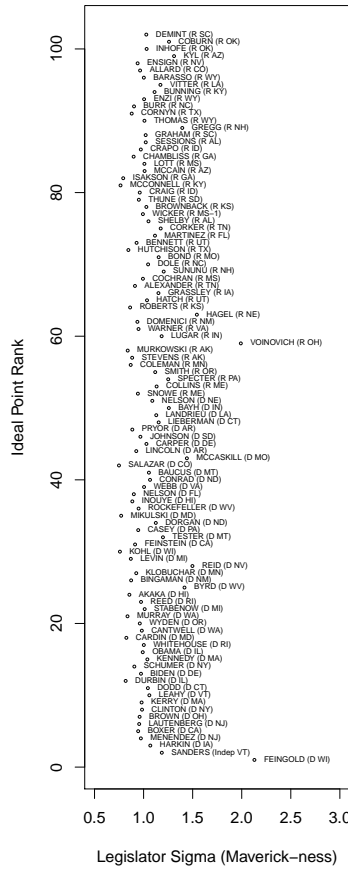
John McCain doesn't sound too thrilled with the new Kerry-Boxer climate bill. In fact, he doesn't seem too keen in crossing the political aisle at all these days. CQ noted that his voting record this session is on track to be the most partisan of his career. But when it comes to climate change, his recent about-face is especially odd. McCain was, after all, an early champion of cap-and-trade, sponsoring climate bills in 2003 and 2005.

Supporting climate change legislation (and before that, campaign finance reform) was precisely the sort of deviation from the party-line that made McCain a maverick. Based on his conversations with people who had worked with McCain in the past, Zwick suggested two plausible theories. First, McCain might be worried about a primary challenge. Such a worry would have been well-founded: as of this writing, McCain faces a challenge from J.D. Hayworth, who is attacking McCain's voting record from the right. Hayworth is running under the campaign slogan "The Consistent Conservative". Second, McCain might be acting out

109th Senate:



110th Senate:



111th Senate: (partial)

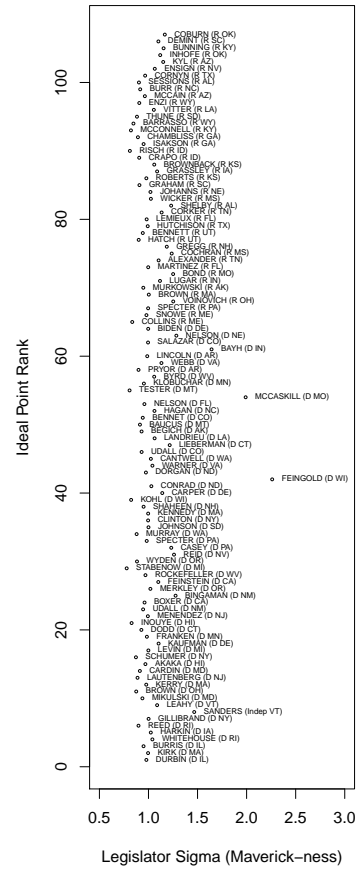


Figure 1: Senators are sorted from top to bottom from the political right to the political left, based on estimated ideal points. The left-right axis displays the degree of maverick-ness.

of spite towards Obama. McCain's period of lowest party unity with his fellow Republicans was immediately after losing to Bush in the Republican primaries in 2000. Perhaps this was just the mirror image effect of having lost to President Obama?

So, how did McCain's voting behavior change in the aggregate? Did he return to the party line on just one high profile bill, or did he shift more generally? Figure 1 shows each of the last three Senates, with Senators sorted from top to bottom from the political right to the political left based on a 1D ideal point estimation. Inspection reveals that most Senators remain around

the same left-right position relative to one another between Congresses (though notice that Feingold shifts sharply towards the political center after the 2008 election). While McCain was among the more maverick legislators in the 109th, he was no longer in either the 110th or the 111th (and shifted to the right in the 111th). While the large number of votes he missed while campaigning in the 110th might account for his lack of maverick voting, it appears this is a genuine shift in behavior in the 111th. Figure 2 shows that John McCain's maverick voting did not begin in earnest until the 104th Congress (1995-6), when Republicans took control of Congress. After losing the Republican nomination, his maverick voting peaked in the 107th Congress (2001-2) and stayed high through the 2006 election. McCain voted only rarely during the 110th session (the first after the Democrats took control). However, it appears that McCain has truly changed his voting behavior in the 111th Congress, not only becoming very conservative but also no longer voting idiosyncratically in the ways he has in the past.

#### REFERENCES

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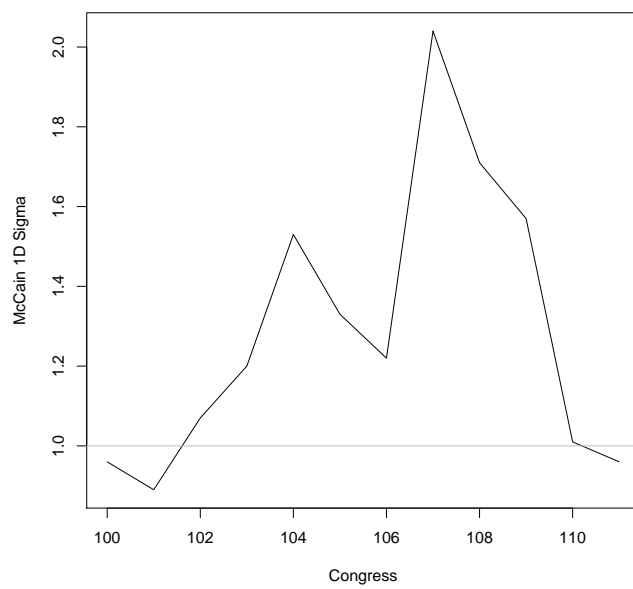


Figure 2: McCain's unpredictability over time.