

Efficiency, Stability, and Reliability Implications of Unbalanced Current Sharing Among Distributed On-Chip Voltage Regulators

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Abstract—Power delivery networks with distributed on-chip voltage regulators (VRs) serve as an effective way for fast localized voltage regulation within modern microprocessors. Without careful consideration of the interactions among the distributed VRs and the power grid, unbalanced current sharing (CS) among those regulators may, however, lead to efficiency degradations, stability, and reliability issues, and even malfunctions of the regulators. This paper is a first attempt to investigate the efficiency, stability, and reliability implications of unbalanced CS among distributed on-chip VRs. Benefits of balanced CS are demonstrated with concrete examples, showing the necessity of an appropriate current balancing scheme. An adaptive reference voltage control method and the corresponding control algorithms specifically for distributed on-chip VRs are proposed to balance the CS among regulators at different locations. The proposed techniques successfully balance the CS among distributed VRs and can be applied to different regulator types. Simulation results based on practical microprocessor setups confirm the efficiency, stability, and reliability implications.

Index Terms—Current sharing (CS), distributed on-chip voltage regulator (VR), power delivery network (PDN), power efficiency, reliability, stability.

I. INTRODUCTION

EFFICIENT, stable, and reliable operations of power delivery networks (PDNs) are crucial to sustain high-performance and low-power design targets of modern large-scale integrated circuits (ICs). Thermal design power (TDP) of microprocessors has increased over generations and can go beyond 100 W [1]. The peak power of a microprocessor can, however, be 1.5 times the TDP rating [2]. Even small power conversion efficiency degradations within such power-hungry ICs lead to tremendous power loss, resulting in higher heat dissipation. Meanwhile, the complexity and the large component count incur serious stability and reliability concerns.

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Voltage regulators (VRs) as an essential part of PDNs, including commonly used buck, switched capacitor (SC), and low-dropout (LDO) regulators, have been moved from off-chip placements to on-chip implementations to save board area and to enable efficient, fast, and secure localized voltage regulation [3]–[5]. Distributed on-chip voltage regulation has recently become an emerging research field where multiple on-chip VRs are connected in parallel and distributed across the power grid to supply current across the whole die [6]–[13]. Previous work mainly focuses on the efficiency improvement of stand-alone VRs [3] and that of the PDNs as a whole [14]. The implications of the complex interactions among on-chip VRs and the power grid have, however, been typically overlooked. Although there are appealing benefits of the distributed on-chip voltage regulation, complex interactions among regulators and the power grid may lead to significant efficiency, stability, and reliability issues. Among the various implications of distributed on-chip voltage regulation, unbalanced current sharing (CS), if not carefully controlled, can stultify the previously proposed efficiency enhancement benefits or even shorten the lifetime of the chip.

Unbalanced CS problem has been widely studied in conventional power electronics field for multiphase interleaving buck regulators [15], [16]. Little attention has, however, been paid to this problem within microelectronics field for distributed on-chip voltage regulation, and, to the best of our knowledge, the efficiency, stability, and reliability implications of unbalanced CS within distributed on-chip PDNs have not yet been investigated.

VRs within distributed on-chip PDNs are connected to a passive mesh network [1], which supplies the required current to the load circuits. Several factors may lead to unbalanced CS within distributed on-chip power delivery systems that consist of multiple parallel VRs. These factors include mismatches in the component values and control loop mismatches, which are common factors leading to the unbalanced current within conventional centralized multiphase regulators [15], [16]. Specific to distributed on-chip PDNs, the power grid parasitic impedance among the VRs and load circuits, although quite small, may have significant variations based on the placement of the VRs and the load circuits. Therefore, even with perfectly matched components and control loops among different distributed on-chip VRs, the variations of the power grid resistance among individual VRs and load circuits may lead to nonnegligible mismatch and severe CS problems.

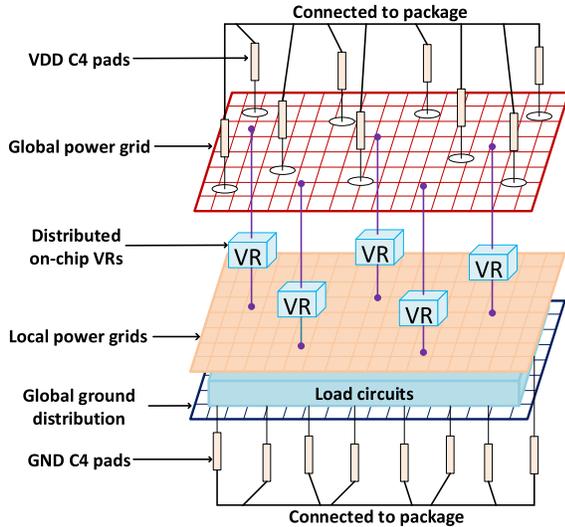


Fig. 1. On-chip PDN with distributed VRs.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, the unbalanced CS problem is presented with extensive simulations in both Cadence Virtuoso and VoltSpot [18]. Power efficiency, stability, and reliability implications of the unbalanced CS within distributed on-chip PDNs are investigated. Theoretical derivations and simulation results lead to the observation that unbalanced CS can adversely affect the important design concerns, which necessitates an efficient current balancing scheme. Second, an adaptive reference voltage control mechanism is proposed as the current balancing scheme for distributed on-chip VRs to dynamically modulate the reference voltage of each individual VR. Circuit implementations are analyzed for the proposed control algorithm and preliminary simulations are performed to verify the effectiveness. Finally, an IBM POWER8-like [17] microprocessor simulation platform is constructed in VoltSpot [18] to study the implications of the unbalanced CS problem in practical applications. Extensive simulations based on several benchmarks are performed and simulation results confirm the benefits of balanced CS. Although the analyses are conducted assuming a homogeneous PDN with buck regulators, without loss of generality, the proposed technique can be easily applied to heterogeneous PDNs that house different regulator types.

II. UNBALANCED CURRENT SHARING PROBLEM

An on-chip PDN model with distributed VRs is shown in Fig. 1. The inputs of the distributed VRs are connected to a global power grid that is connected to the package through the dedicated C4 pads. The outputs of the distributed on-chip VRs provide the required current at the target voltage level to the local power grid that feeds the load circuits. The global ground distribution provides the ground plane for the load circuits and is connected to the package through the dedicated GND C4 pads. The global and local power grid, and the global ground distribution are composed of orthogonal metal lines connected with vias [1]. With a first-order approximation, these power grids can be modeled as a resistive mesh where the effective resistance between any two nodes on the power

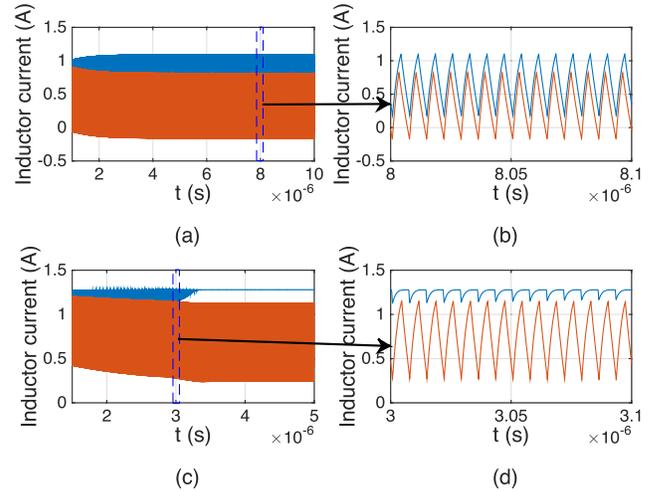


Fig. 2. Unbalanced CS between two identical distributed on-chip buck regulators. (a) Inductor currents of two identical regulators supplying total load current of 1 A. (b) Zoomed-in view of the inductor current profiles at steady state. (c) Inductor currents of two identical regulators supplying total load current of 2 A, one inductor current goes saturated due to the maximum 1.27-A load current one regulator can supply. (d) Zoomed-in view of the inductor current profiles showing the saturation of one inductor current.

grid depends on the distance between the two nodes [19], [20]. The effective resistance mismatch between the distributed VRs with only local voltage regulation loops may cause unbalanced CS among the VRs and may even cause VR malfunctions.

To demonstrate the unbalanced CS problem, two sets of simulations are performed. First, two identical buck regulators providing localized voltage regulation are designed and simulated in Cadence Virtuoso using the IBM 130-nm CMOS process. The input voltage of the buck regulator is 3.3 V and the output voltage is 1 V. The switching frequency is 140 MHz with a 5-nH inductor. The peak-to-peak current ripple on the inductor is about 1 A and the load regulation is 0.02%/A. Each regulator has a maximum load current supply capability of 1.27 A. The on-chip power grid is designed as a resistive mesh using the design parameters of respective metal layers in [21]. Second, a buck regulator model is extracted and included in VoltSpot [18] for PDN simulations with large number of on-chip VRs. An IBM POWER8-like processor with 96 identical distributed regulators is used in the simulations. Detailed VoltSpot simulation setup is explained in Section VII. Simulation results demonstrating the unbalanced CS problem in both Cadence Virtuoso and VoltSpot are summarized in this section.

A. Large Current Variations

The load current supplied by a buck regulator is the average value of the respective inductor current. The inductor current of the two regulators when the total load current is 1 A is shown in Fig. 2(a) and (b). Due to the difference in the effective resistance for the two regulators, these regulators have different average inductor current values of 328.7 and 671.3 mA. With unbalanced CS, one regulator supplies more than twice the output current than the other. With a larger effective resistance mismatch, the difference can be even larger.

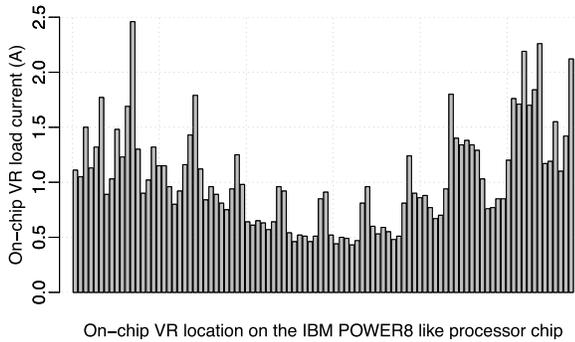


Fig. 3. Unbalanced CS among 96 identical distributed on-chip VRs within IBM POWER8-like microprocessor.

The output current values of the 96 identical distributed on-chip VRs within an IBM POWER8-like microprocessor chip for application `lu_ncb` are shown in Fig. 3. The detailed simulation setup is explained in Section VII. In this simulation, 96 on-chip VRs are evenly distributed across the chip. As can be seen from Fig. 3, large current variations occur among these on-chip VRs. The highest current supplied by one VR goes up to nearly 2.5 A and the lowest current supplied by one VR is around 0.5 A. There is $5\times$ difference between the highest and the lowest on-chip VR current.

B. Voltage Regulator Malfunctions

For the same two buck regulator design at the same physical locations on the power grid as used in Section II-A, with a higher total load current of 2 A, the inductor current distribution between the two regulators is shown in Fig. 2(c) and (d). As can be seen from Fig. 2(c) and (d), the difference between the two regulator inductor currents gradually becomes larger, and at steady state, one inductor becomes saturated and provides a constant current. For the saturated regulator, the pull-up pMOS transistor is always ON, leading to 100% duty cycle operation and the malfunction of the VR. When the total load current is equally shared between the two, the malfunction of the VRs could be avoided, as the current supplied by each VR is less than the maximum VR current capability.

Note that, in Fig. 3, the on-chip VR model is included in VoltSpot for current distribution simulations and no limit is set for the maximum current that an individual VR can provide. If the output current capability of a VR is designed to be 1.5 A, there would be more than ten on-chip VRs that enter this saturation point in this simulation, leading to chip-wide VR malfunctions. As overcurrent protection schemes are implemented for most VRs, VR malfunctions can be avoided. However, overloaded current can lead to output voltage drop [22], which is still not acceptable. Furthermore, as one VR supplies $5\times$ current than the other, huge current density can lead to local hotspots of the VR and even destroy the VR and the nearby functional blocks.

With unbalanced CS, each on-chip VR needs to be designed for the worst case scenario to be able to supply the highest possible current with high efficiency. The size of power MOSFETs needs to be increased as compared with the design targeting

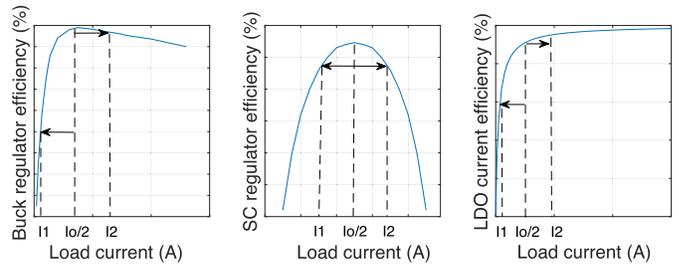


Fig. 4. Conventional buck regulator, SC regulator, and LDO efficiency curves.

at the total load current divided by N for N distributed VRs, which may introduce extra power and area overhead, as power MOSFETs can occupy a large percentage of the total VR area.

III. EFFICIENCY IMPLICATIONS OF UNBALANCED CURRENT SHARING

Power conversion efficiency curves for the conventional buck, SC, and LDO regulators are shown in Fig. 4. Consider two identical distributed on-chip buck or SC regulators with each design optimized at $I_o/2$ for a total load current of I_o . With balanced CS, each buck or SC regulator operates at the optimum design point, providing maximum efficiency. With unbalanced CS, one regulator provides lower current I_1 while the other one provides higher current I_2 . As can be seen from Fig. 4, any variation in the load current from the optimum load current point leads to an unavoidable power efficiency loss. For LDOs, the efficiency is determined by

$$\eta_{\text{LDO}} = \frac{I_o V_o}{(I_o + I_q) V_i} \quad (1)$$

where I_o is the output current of the LDO and I_q is the quiescent current. With balanced CS, each LDO provides $I_o/2$ current and the total efficiency is $(I_o V_o/2)/(I_o/2 + I_q) V_i = I_o V_o/(I_o + 2I_q) V_i$. With unbalanced CS, one of the LDOs provides I_1 current and the other one provides I_2 current with $I_1 + I_2 = I_o$. Since MOS transistors have a nearly constant quiescent current with respect to the load current [23], the total efficiency can be expressed as $(I_1 + I_2) V_o/(I_1 + I_2 + 2I_q) V_i$, which is the same as the balanced CS case. Theoretically, there is no significant efficiency degradation due to unbalanced CS for LDOs; however, larger currents induced by the unbalanced CS do adversely affect the reliability as will be discussed in Section V.

Buck regulators will be the focus throughout this paper; however, the proposed techniques can also be tailored for SC and LDO regulators. The regulator loss model and optimum efficiency discussions are provided in Section III-A. The extra power loss and the efficiency degradation induced by unbalanced CS for the general case of N identical distributed on-chip regulators are theoretically explored in Section III-B.

A. Regulator Loss Model and Efficiency

The simplified schematic of a synchronous buck regulator is shown in Fig. 5. It is composed of the high-side (Q1) and low-side (Q2) power MOSFETs for synchronous rectification, LC filter with parasitic resistances R_{DCR} and R_{ESR} , and a feedback control path.

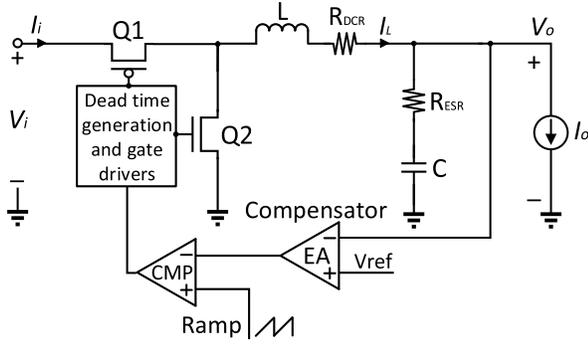


Fig. 5. Simplified schematic of synchronous buck regulator.

The simplified power loss model in [25] is enhanced by including the conduction loss of the capacitor equivalent series resistance (ESR) (P_{ESR}) for the power loss analysis in synchronous buck regulators

$$P_{loss} = R_{eq} \cdot i_{rms}^2 + P_{ESR} + A \cdot f \quad (2)$$

where R_{eq} is the regulator equivalent resistance, i_{rms} is the inductor rms current, A is the switching power loss factor, and f is the regulator switching frequency. Detailed power loss analysis and expressions for R_{eq} , P_{ESR} , and A can be referred to [24] and [25].

Power conversion efficiency can be written as

$$\eta = \frac{P_{out}}{P_{out} + P_{loss}} \quad (3)$$

Since P_{ESR} is independent of the regulator output current I_o , by setting $\partial\eta/\partial I_o = 0$, the maximum efficiency for the continuous conduction mode (CCM) operation is obtained as [25]

$$\eta_{max} = \frac{1}{1 + 2 \frac{R_{eq}}{V_o} \cdot I_{o_opt}} \quad (4)$$

at the optimum load current of

$$I_{o_opt} = \sqrt{\frac{A \cdot f + P_{ESR}}{R_{eq}}} + \frac{1}{12} I_{p-p}^2 \quad (5)$$

where V_o and I_{p-p} are, respectively, the regulator output voltage and the inductor peak-to-peak current.

B. Efficiency Degradation of Distributed Regulators With Unbalanced Current Sharing

Consider two identical buck regulators and assume the total load current supplied by these two regulators is I_o and each regulator design is optimized at $I_o/2$. With unbalanced CS, the load currents supplied by the two regulators are, respectively, I_1 and I_2 for regulators 1 and 2. CS ratios (CSRs) for the two regulators are

$$CSR_1 = \frac{I_1}{I_o}, \quad CSR_2 = \frac{I_2}{I_o} \quad (6)$$

According to (2), for CCM operations, the extra power loss induced by the unbalanced CS for two regulators as compared with the balanced case is

$$P_{loss_2}^{ex} = R_{eq} \cdot I_o^2 \cdot \left(CSR_1^2 + CSR_2^2 - \frac{1}{2} \right) \quad (7)$$

and $P_{loss_2}^{ex} = 0$ if and only if when $CSR_1 = CSR_2 = 1/2$, otherwise, $P_{loss_2}^{ex} > 0$, which means that unbalanced CS leads to extra power loss.

Efficiency degradation due to unbalanced CS can be written as

$$\eta_{deg_2} = \eta_{max} \Big|_{I_{o_opt} = \frac{I_o}{2}} - \frac{V_o}{\frac{V_o}{\eta_{max} \Big|_{I_{o_opt} = \frac{I_o}{2}}} + R_{eq} \cdot I_o \cdot \left(CSR_1^2 + CSR_2^2 - \frac{1}{2} \right)} \quad (8)$$

where $\eta_{max} \Big|_{I_{o_opt} = I_o/2}$ is the maximum efficiency at the optimum load current of $I_o/2$. Note that $\eta_{deg} = 0$ for balanced CS.

Equations (7) and (8) can be generalized for N identical distributed on-chip VRs with each design optimized at I_o/N for a total load current of I_o as explained in the following.

The extra power loss induced by unbalanced CS with CSR_i for the i th regulator is

$$P_{loss_N}^{ex} = R_{eq} \cdot I_o^2 \cdot \left(\sum_{i=1}^N CSR_i^2 - \frac{1}{N} \right) \quad (9)$$

The total efficiency degradation induced by unbalanced CS is

$$\eta_{deg_N} = \eta_{max} \Big|_{I_{o_opt} = \frac{I_o}{N}} - \frac{V_o}{\frac{V_o}{\eta_{max} \Big|_{I_{o_opt} = \frac{I_o}{N}}} + R_{eq} \cdot I_o \cdot \left(\sum_{i=1}^N CSR_i^2 - \frac{1}{N} \right)} \quad (10)$$

Note that (9) and (10) can be applied to a wide range of load current. As the phase shedding technique [26], [27] for conventional multiphase converters and the converter gating technique [5] for distributed on-chip VRs are well developed to enhance the light load efficiency and achieve a high efficiency over a wide load range, the number of active VRs N_{active} can be dynamically changed to make sure that each regulator can operate at the optimal efficiency point under various load conditions with balanced CS. Thus, (9) and (10) hold for extra power loss and efficiency degradation calculations under a wide load range.

As an example, using design parameters in [3] for the fully integrated buck regulator, the extra power loss and the efficiency degradation are evaluated for two and three distributed buck regulator cases with different CSR values. Each regulator is optimized at 225 mA, and the total load currents are, respectively, 450 and 675 mA for two and three regulator cases. As can be seen from Fig. 6, as CSR varies from the balanced CS point ($CSR_1 = 0.5$ for two regulator case and $CSR_1 = CSR_2 = 1/3$ for three regulator case), the additional power loss and the efficiency degradation increase rapidly. Moreover, the highest extra power loss and the efficiency degradation points for the three regulator case are worse than the two regulator case. It is difficult to visually demonstrate the extra power loss and the efficiency degradation change when the number of regulators increase over three. With more number of regulators and larger output current, however, the highest extra power loss and efficiency degradation further increase. This indicates that significant attention should be paid to guarantee the proper CS among distributed on-chip VRs that are widely used in high-performance microprocessors.

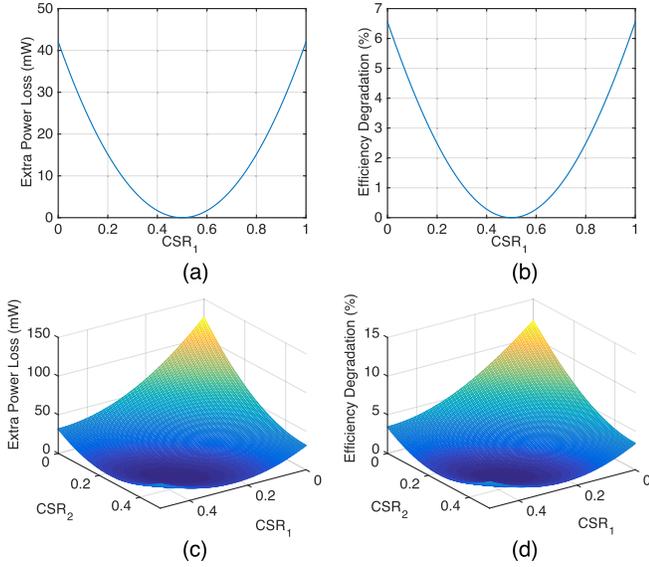


Fig. 6. Unbalanced CS-induced extra power loss and efficiency degradation as a function of CSR_i for N identical distributed on-chip VRs. (a) Extra power loss, $N = 2$. (b) Efficiency degradation, $N = 2$. (c) Extra power loss, $N = 3$. (d) Efficiency degradation, $N = 3$.

IV. STABILITY IMPLICATIONS OF UNBALANCED CURRENT SHARING

Stable operation of the stand-alone on-chip VR as well as the whole PDN is the basis for every other performance metric. Oscillations can occur due to an unstable internal feedback loop of a single VR or interactions among different VRs. The stability issue, if not properly addressed, can adversely affect important design aspects, including line and load regulations, making other performance enhancing techniques useless.

Stability implications of unbalanced CS are explored for both individual on-chip VRs and the PDN as a whole in this section. To evaluate the effects of unbalanced CS on individual on-chip VRs, the state-space averaging method [28] is applied to obtain the various important transfer functions of closed-loop synchronous buck regulators while considering parasitic impedances. For the stability of the whole PDN, the implications of unbalanced CS can be examined by analyzing the Y-parameter model of the individual on-chip VRs based on the recently proposed hybrid stability framework for PDNs [8].

A. Stability of Individual On-Chip Voltage Regulators

The state-space expression for a conventional voltage mode controlled buck regulator with diode rectification and g-parameters has been explored in [29]. For the synchronous buck regulator operating in CCM, as shown in Fig. 5, the open-loop g-parameter set can be written as

$$\begin{bmatrix} Y_{i_o} & T_{oi_o} \\ G_{io_o} & -Z_{o_o} \end{bmatrix} = \frac{\begin{bmatrix} \frac{D^2 s}{L} & \frac{D(1+sR_{ESR}C)}{LC} \\ \frac{D(1+sR_{ESR}C)}{LC} & -\frac{(R_E+sL)(1+sR_{ESR}C)}{LC} \end{bmatrix}}{s^2 + s\frac{R_E+R_{ESR}}{L} + \frac{1}{LC}} \quad (11)$$

$$\begin{bmatrix} G_{ci} \\ G_{co} \end{bmatrix} = \frac{\begin{bmatrix} \frac{sDU_E}{L} \\ \frac{U_E(1+sR_{ESR}C)}{LC} \end{bmatrix}}{s^2 + s\frac{R_E+R_{ESR}}{L} + \frac{1}{LC}} + \begin{bmatrix} I_o \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} \quad (12)$$

where

$$R_E = R_{DCR} + R_{on_{hs}}D + R_{on_{ls}}(1-D) \quad (13)$$

$$U_E = V_i + (R_{on_{ls}} - R_{on_{hs}})I_o. \quad (14)$$

Y_{i_o} , T_{oi_o} , G_{io_o} , Z_{o_o} , G_{ci} , G_{co} , and D are, respectively, the open-loop input admittance, the output to input current transfer function, the input to output voltage transfer function, the output impedance, the control to input current transfer function, the control to output voltage transfer function, and the duty cycle of the buck regulator.

The line and load regulation capabilities of a buck regulator can be examined by analyzing the closed-loop input to output voltage transfer function G_{io_c} and the output impedance Z_{o_c} , respectively. To achieve a stable line and load regulation, all poles of the corresponding transfer function need to lie within the left-half of the s-plane. The closed-loop g-parameters can be obtained based on the open-loop g-parameters and the relationship demonstrated in [29]. Assuming Type III compensation [30], the characteristic equation of G_{io_c} and Z_{o_c} is

$$CLs^2 + (CG_aG_{cc}G_{se}U_E R_{ESR} + CR_{ESR} + CR_E)s + G_aG_{cc}G_{se}U_E + 1 = 0 \quad (15)$$

where G_{se} , G_{cc} , and G_a are, respectively, the sensing gain of the output voltage, the transfer function of the error amplifier (EA) and compensator, and the pulse width modulation generator gain. Typically, G_{se} and G_a are constant. As some of the coefficients are a function of I_o , solutions of (15) change as I_o changes. For N identical distributed on-chip VRs with unbalanced CS, some of the parallel on-chip VRs will supply more current while others will supply less, leading to the movement of system poles. As the stability is affected by the right-half-plane (RHP) poles, we define a CSR- and N -dependent function $S(CSR, N)$ as

$$S(CSR, N) = \begin{cases} \max_{i=1, \dots, n} \{\text{Re}(p_i)\}, & \max_{i=1, \dots, n} \{\text{Re}(p_i)\} < 0 \\ \min_{i=1, \dots, j} \{\text{Re}(p_i^+)\}, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (16)$$

where n , j , p_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$), and p_i^+ ($i = 1, \dots, j$) are, respectively, the total number of system poles, the total number of RHP (or 0) poles, the i th system pole, and the i th RHP (or 0) pole. $|S(CSR, N)|$ either indicates how close the system is to be unstable (for $\max_{i=1, \dots, n} \{\text{Re}(p_i)\} < 0$) or how far the system has gone beyond the marginally stable point (for otherwise). The system is stable if $S(CSR, N) < 0$ and unstable otherwise.

Using similar design parameters in [3], $S(CSR_i, N)$ for the i th VR within N identical distributed on-chip VRs is plotted as a function of CSR_i and N in Fig. 7. It can be seen from Fig. 7 that, for a fixed number N , $S(CSR_i, N)$ increases as CSR_i increases. Note that although all CSR_i values are plotted even for large number of N in Fig. 7 for completeness, due to the maximum current supply capability of a single VR, inductor current of individual VR can become saturated and the CCM model is no longer valid. The output voltage can drop [22] for large number of N and CSR_i values, for example, $N = 80$ and $CSR_i = 0.5$. Also, as N becomes large, $S(CSR_i, N)$

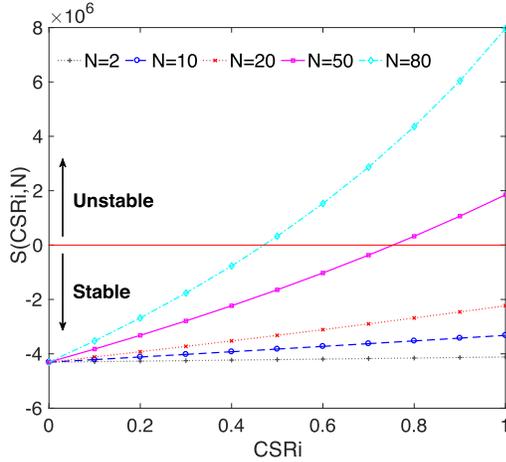


Fig. 7. Stability of individual on-chip VR as a function of CSR_i and N .

approaches the unstable region from the stable one as CSR_i increases, indicating the negative effects of unbalanced CS on the stability and proper operation of individual VR.

B. Stability of the Power Delivery Network

A sufficient condition for stability checking of the PDN is proposed in [8] based on the hybrid stability framework. This condition consists of a complementary way of using either passivity evaluation or system gain evaluation for linear time-invariant systems. By satisfying either one of these two conditions, the stability of the PDN can be guaranteed. For stability checking using the system gain condition, a Z-parameter model of the passive subnetwork is needed for evaluation. The passive subnetwork model can vary for different applications or design requirements, which makes it difficult to evaluate the general effects of unbalanced CS on the stability of PDN. However, the passivity evaluation does shed light on this point.

The synchronous buck regulator system is approximated as a linear continuous-time time-invariant system through the state-space averaging method [31]. Thus, the passivity criterion [8] can be applied, which is given by

$$\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k) = \min_{i=1, \dots, N; j=1, 2} \{ \lambda_j(\mathbf{Y}_i(j\omega_k) + \mathbf{Y}_i^H(j\omega_k)) \} \quad (17)$$

where $\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k)$ is the minimum eigenvalue among any i th VR at ω_k and H denotes the complex conjugate transpose. Passivity condition is met for the VRs if $\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k) \geq 0$.

The Y-parameter model for the i th VR can be obtained through the closed-loop g-parameters. Note that the Y-parameter model is a function of individual VR output current I_o , and thus, with unbalanced CS, it will be affected and so does $\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k)$. Using the same design parameters in Section IV-A, $\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)$ is examined for the i th VR under different CSR_i and N values in Fig. 8, where

$$\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k) = \min_{j=1, 2} \{ \lambda_j(\mathbf{Y}_i(j\omega_k) + \mathbf{Y}_i^H(j\omega_k)) \}. \quad (18)$$

$\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)$ remains negative for $f_k < 10$ MHz and positive for $f_k > 100$ MHz. As I_o supplied by the i th VR (i.e., $N \cdot CSR_i$ increases), $\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)$ shifts rightward, rendering

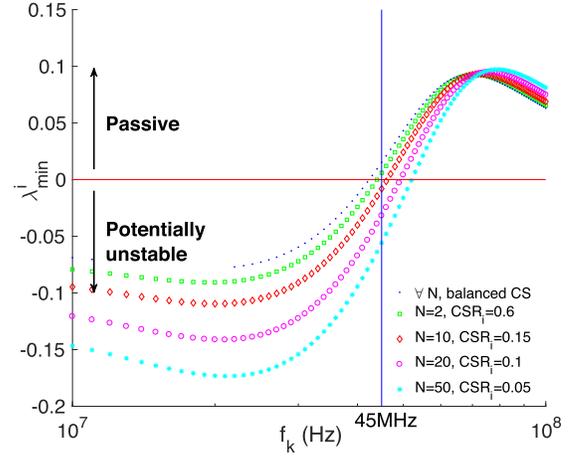


Fig. 8. $\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)$ as a function of f_k under different values of CSR_i and N . $\lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)$ shifts rightward as $N \cdot CSR_i$ increases, demonstrating the adverse effects of unbalanced CS on VR passivity.

the following:

$$\begin{aligned} \lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k)|_{\omega_k \leq \omega_{k0}} &= \min_{i=1, \dots, N} \{ \lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k) \} \\ &= \lambda_{\min}^i(j\omega_k)|_{CSR_i = CSR_{\max}} \end{aligned} \quad (19)$$

where

$$\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_{k0}) = 0, \quad CSR_{\max} = \max_{i=1, \dots, N} CSR_i. \quad (20)$$

For example, at $f_k = 45$ MHz, with balanced CS (i.e., $\forall N$, balanced CS), $\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k)|_{\omega_k=9\pi \cdot 10^7} > 0$, the passivity condition is satisfied. However, with unbalanced CS case (e.g., $N = 20$, $CSR_i = 0.1$), $\lambda_{\min}(j\omega_k)|_{\omega_k=9\pi \cdot 10^7} < 0$, which pushes the originally passive point to the potentially unstable region, indicating the adverse effects of unbalanced CS on the stability of the whole PDN.

V. RELIABILITY IMPLICATIONS OF UNBALANCED CURRENT SHARING

Electromigration (EM)-induced wear-out dictates the lifetime of each component of the PDN. EM results in gradual mass transport in metal conductors along the direction of an applied electric field, which, in turn, may cause open or short circuits. The metal wires in the PDN are particularly vulnerable to EM as they experience unidirectional currents [32], and such constant stress reveals EM failures faster. EM grows with current density J .

Black's equation [33] captures the mean time to failure (MTTF) due to EM

$$MTTF = AJ^{-n} \exp(Ea/kT) \quad (21)$$

where A is a constant that depends on the geometry, Ea is the EM activation energy, k is Boltzmann's constant, n is a material-specific constant, and T is the temperature. Following [18], Black's equation can be adjusted to consider current crowding and Joule heating as:

$$MTTF = A(cJ)^{-n} \exp[Q/k(T + \Delta T)] \quad (22)$$

where both Q and c are material-specific constants.

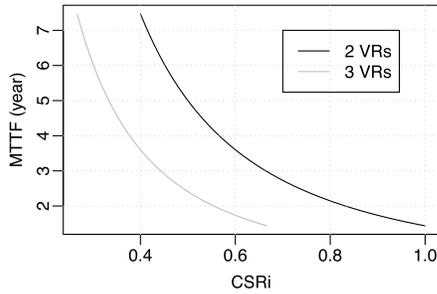


Fig. 9. MTTF as a function of CSR_i .

Consider N identical distributed on-chip VRs, each of which optimized for a load current of I_o/N , where I_o represents the total load current. Since J is directly related to CSR_i at a specific I_o , MTTF of the metal wire at the output of the i th regulator can be expressed in terms of CSR_i as

$$MTTF_i = A'(cCSR_i)^{-n} \exp[Q/k(T + \Delta T)] \quad (23)$$

where A' is a constant that depends on the geometry and I_o .

For the same example in [3], for two and three regulator cases with a total load current of 450 and 675 mA, respectively, Fig. 9 shows how $MTTF_i$ for the i th regulator changes due to unbalanced CS. Fig. 9 captures the impact of unbalanced CS on MTTF under EM per (23). We report how the MTTF varies as a function of CSR, where $n = 1.8$, $Q = 0.8$ eV, $c = 10$, and $\Delta T = 40$ °C [34]. We observe that differences in CSR can result in notable differences in MTTF. The MTTF at $CSR = 0.5$ (0.33), which corresponds to perfect load balance, is 5 years at 65 °C for the two (three) regulator case. For the two regulator case, both regulators would have this similar $MTTF = 5$ years at $CSR = 0.5$. If CSR assumes a higher value than 0.5 for one of the regulators, the MTTF value quickly decreases below 5 years. The other regulator's CSR in this case remains lower than 0.5, and hence induces an MTTF of more than 5 years. In this case, one of the regulators would fail much earlier than the other. Better load balance (i.e., $CSR = 0.5$ for the two regulator case) mitigates this adverse effect on reliability. Fig. 9 reveals a similar trend for three VR case.

VI. ADAPTIVE REFERENCE VOLTAGE CONTROL

The implications of unbalanced CS on power efficiency, stability, reliability, and overall functionality of the chip are demonstrated earlier. Balanced CS is beneficial to maintain the overall PDN performance. An adaptive reference voltage control method designed specifically for distributed on-chip VRs is proposed to balance the CS. The proposed technique is scalable for different numbers of distributed on-chip VRs and can be used for different types of VRs. The control algorithm is explained and circuit implementation and simulations are presented to verify the effectiveness of the proposed techniques. Practical concerns are also addressed in this section.

A. Adaptive V_{ref} Control Mechanism

Consider two identical distributed VRs connected to the same power grid. The simplified model is shown in Fig. 10

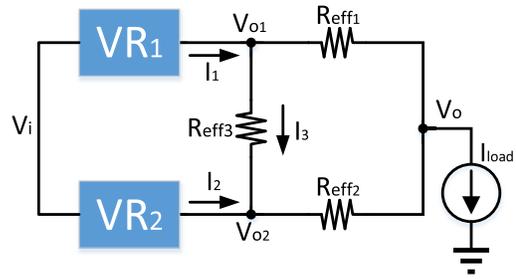


Fig. 10. Simplified model of two identical distributed on-chip VRs with power grid effective resistances.

with the power grid effective resistance included between any two connection nodes within the grid. With a large number of VDD C4 pads, the input voltage of the VRs V_i can be considered ideal and constant. To perform a steady-state analysis with multiple VRs, suppose $V_{o1} = V_{o2}$, then $I_3 = 0$, and R_{eff3} can be removed as open circuit. When $V_{o1} = V_{o2}$, to make $I_1 = I_2$ for balanced CS, R_{eff1} and R_{eff2} have to be equal. However, in practice, due to the location variations of the VRs with respect to the load, R_{eff1} and R_{eff2} can hardly be equal, which means variations between V_{o1} and V_{o2} are unavoidable to make $I_1 = I_2$ for balanced CS. In fact, the effective resistances R_{eff1} , R_{eff2} , and R_{eff3} are very small, making the balanced CS possible with quite small variations of V_{o1} and V_{o2} with negligible effects on the regulated output voltage V_o .

Based on the above-mentioned analyses, an adaptive reference voltage V_{ref} control mechanism that is tailored specifically for distributed on-chip VRs is proposed. A system-level block diagram of the proposed adaptive V_{ref} control method is shown in Fig. 11, and the V_{ref} control algorithm is presented in Fig. 12 for N identical distributed on-chip VRs. The proposed adaptive V_{ref} control block consists of an average current sensor within each VR, two comparators with N inputs for each (N comparator) [35] to determine the maximum and minimum currents, a *current_mismatch* decision block, and a V_{ref} control logic. For each iteration, the average current value of each VR for that cycle is obtained through the average current sensor and represented by respective output voltage V_{sense_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$). The maximum and minimum values of V_{sense_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$) are decided by the N comparator [35]. The difference between the maximum and minimum current is compared with a *current_mismatch* value by the *current_mismatch* decision block. The processed outputs of the N comparator and *current_mismatch* decision block serve as the control signals for the V_{ref} control logic for multilevel V_{ref} generation through the switch network and resistor string. Mismatch between the maximum and minimum average inductor current indicates unbalanced CS. If the mismatch is larger than a certain threshold *current_mismatch*, the proposed V_{ref} control algorithm is triggered and the corresponding reference voltages are adjusted. The *current_mismatch* value is added as an option to adjust the desired accuracy for the current matching among the VRs and to eliminate constant toggling during steady state where all the VR output currents are close to each other. If the optimal load current

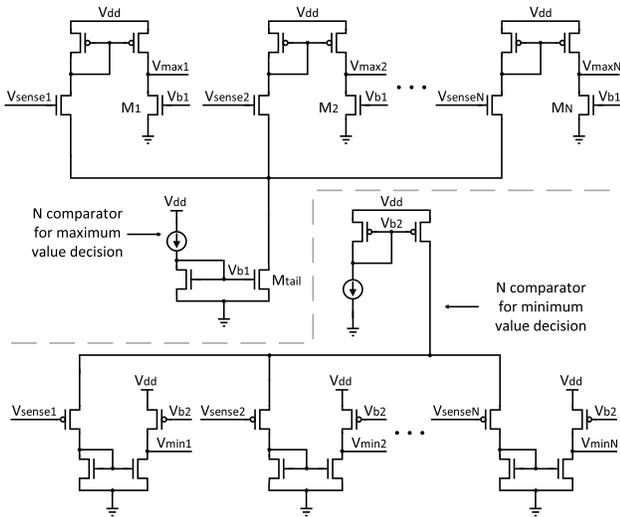


Fig. 14. Schematic of the analog N comparator for maximum and minimum current decision.

$1/N$ of the tail current, the output voltage becomes logic high when a branch gets more than $1/N$ of the tail current, which is true for the branch with the highest voltage, and logic low if a branch gets less than $1/N$ of the tail current. The high-resistance node provides high gain at the output but further cascading may be needed to provide rail-to-rail outputs. Less than 1 mV input voltage difference can be distinguished by cascading three stages in the simulations. In the case where the input voltages are very close to each other, this comparator may give incorrect outputs where more than one current is minimum or maximum. Considering this case, the outputs of the N comparator V_{\max_i} and V_{\min_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$) are processed by a digital logic to generate V'_{\max_i} and V'_{\min_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$) to control the *current_mismatch* decision block and the V_{ref} control logic shown in Fig. 11. If there are more than one maximum or minimum current, the digital logic simply selects the VR with smaller i as the one that supplies the maximum or minimum current. The N comparator for minimum current decision can be implemented as a complement of the N comparator for maximum current decision shown in Fig. 14.

3) *Current_Mismatch Decision*: The schematic of the *current_mismatch* decision block is shown in Fig. 15. The processed outputs of the N comparator V'_{\max_i} and V'_{\min_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$) are fed to $2N$ transmission gates as selection signals for the maximum and minimum value of V_{sense_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$). The maximum and minimum values of V_{sense_i} serve as the inputs of the *current_mismatch* comparator as, respectively, V_{\max} and V_{\min} to generate the enable signal EN for subsequent V_{ref} control logic. An intentional input transistor size mismatch is introduced for the *current_mismatch* comparator with larger transistor size connected to V_{\min} as compared with that connected to V_{\max} to achieve the offset voltage V_{offset} that corresponds to the *current_mismatch* value. Only when $V_{\max} - V_{\min} > V_{\text{offset}}$ will the EN signal be active. As *current_mismatch* does not need to be accurate as long as it is larger than Δ (ΔI), as will be discussed

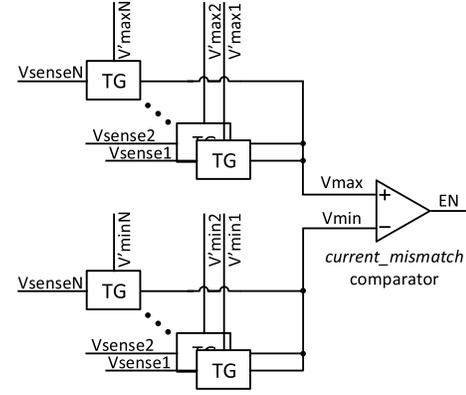


Fig. 15. Schematic of the *current_mismatch* decision block.

next, practical circuit implementations considering process variations have negligible impacts on the circuit function.

4) *Multilevel V_{ref} Generation*: The proposed multilevel V_{ref} generator is composed of a V_{ref} control logic, a bandgap voltage reference, and a simple resistor string digital-to-analog converter (DAC) as shown in Fig. 11. There are two resistors with large resistance R_b at the top and the bottom of the string and a few resistors with smaller resistance R_s connected in the middle to generate the desired V_{refs} . V'_{\max_i} , V'_{\min_i} ($i = 1, \dots, N$), EN , and a clock signal, which is a delayed version of ϕ , are given to the V_{ref} control logic. This logic determines how the reference voltages for each VR should behave according to the algorithm in Fig. 12. The logic can be implemented completely in Verilog and synthesized.

The reference voltage generation requires analog implementation, and this implementation can be a resistor string DAC. The voltage step level that can achieve the desired *current_mismatch* value is the LSB of the DAC. The goal of the adaptive V_{ref} control method is to achieve $\Delta I = I_{\max} - I_{\min} < \text{current_mismatch}$. If without V_{ref} control, $\Delta I = \Delta I_0$, and one voltage step change can introduce Δ (ΔI) of ΔI change, the number of bits for the DAC (N_{DAC}) that is fine enough for balanced CS can be estimated as $N_{\text{DAC}} > \log_2(\Delta I_0 / \Delta(\Delta I))$. A 7-bit DAC is used to achieve a 30-mA *current_mismatch* value with a voltage step of 1 mV in the simulations. In the case where large number of VRs and high-resolution DAC are needed, a charge pump can be utilized for each phase after the V_{ref} control logic for DAC implementation to avoid possible routing problem induced by the resistor string.

C. Simulation Verifications

To demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed control method, two and three identical distributed on-chip VR cases are simulated. The power grid parameters are provided in Section VII. Simulation results with constant dc load current are shown in Figs. 16 and 17, respectively, for the two and three VR cases. In the simulations, ideal $V_{\text{ref}} = 0.5$ V is used to realize 1 V output voltage. A V_{ref} step of 1 mV is used in the simulations. The proposed adaptive V_{ref} control method begins to operate at 5 μs . As can be seen from Figs. 16(a) and (c) and 17(a) and (c), for

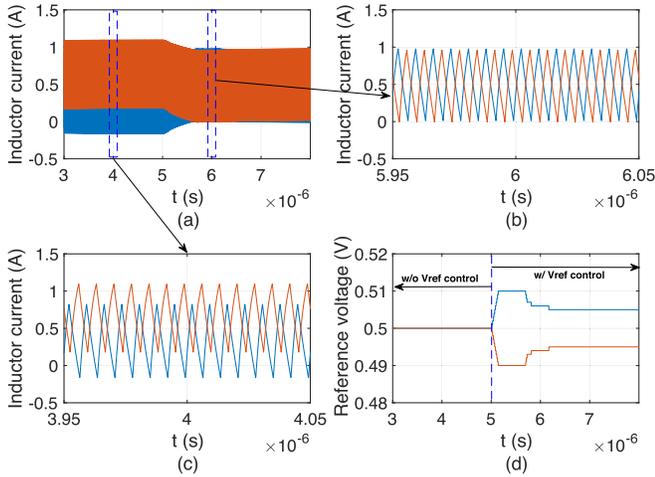


Fig. 16. Simulation results with and without the proposed adaptive V_{ref} control scheme for two identical distributed on-chip VRs. (a) Inductor currents before and after the proposed V_{ref} control is applied. (b) Zoomed-in view of balanced CS showing the effectiveness of the proposed V_{ref} control method. (c) Zoomed-in view of unbalanced CS without the proposed V_{ref} control. (d) V_{ref} signal change showing the operation of the proposed V_{ref} control method.

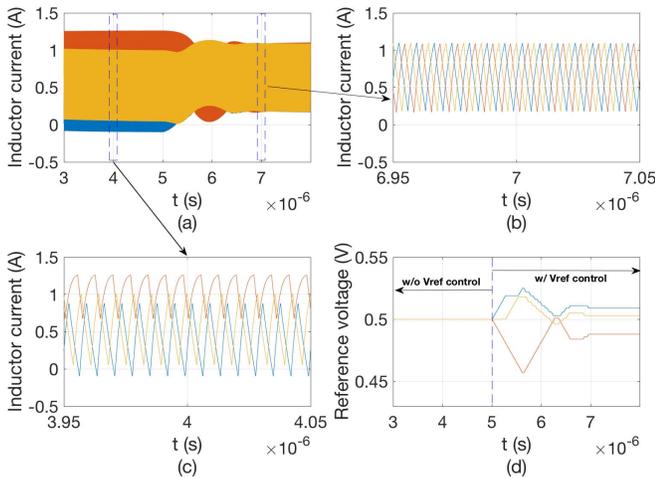


Fig. 17. Simulation results with and without the proposed adaptive V_{ref} control scheme for three identical distributed on-chip VRs. (a) Inductor currents before and after the proposed V_{ref} control is applied. (b) Zoomed-in view of balanced CS showing the effectiveness of the proposed V_{ref} control method. (c) Zoomed-in view of unbalanced CS without the proposed V_{ref} control. (d) V_{ref} signal change showing the operation of the proposed V_{ref} control method.

stand-alone VRs operating without proper V_{ref} control, large inductor current variations occur among those VRs. After the proposed V_{ref} control mechanism is applied, seen from Figs. 16(a) and (b) and 17(a) and (b), the unbalanced current converges quickly to the balanced one for both two and three VR cases. Also, as can be seen from Figs. 16(d) and 17(d), only small variations of reference voltage lead to quite good inductor current match, and meanwhile, the proper operation of the VRs is guaranteed. Simulation results with a fast changing sinusoidal and a step current load are shown in Fig. 18. In the simulations, the frequency of the sinusoidal wave is ten times of the VR switching frequency. As can be seen from Fig. 18, the proposed V_{ref} control method works well under changing load currents.

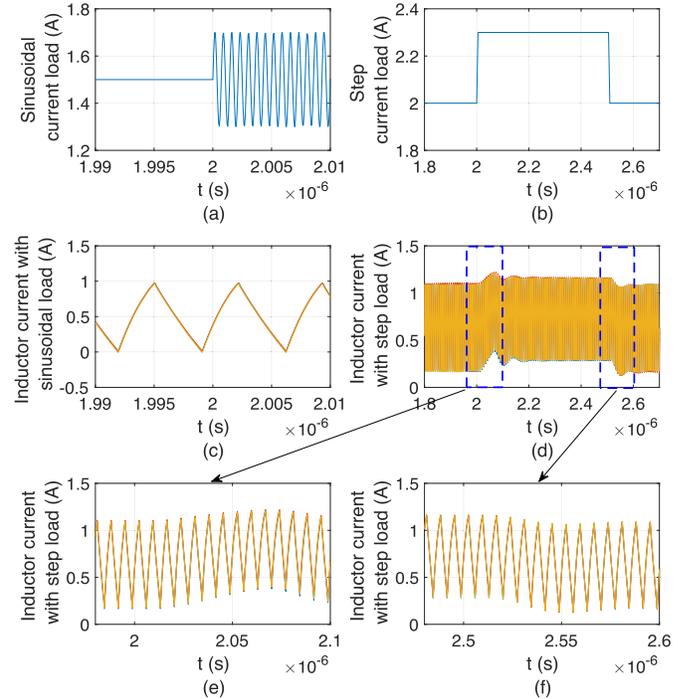


Fig. 18. Simulation results with sinusoidal and step load current for three identical distributed on-chip VRs. (a) Sinusoidal load current applied at $2 \mu\text{s}$. (b) Step load current waveform applied. (c) Balanced inductor currents under sinusoidal current load. (d) Balanced inductor currents under step current load. (e) Zoomed-in view of balanced inductor currents near the rising edge of the step current load. (f) Zoomed-in view of balanced inductor currents near the falling edge of the step current load.

D. Practical Concerns

Considering the practical implementations of the V_{ref} control method, there are parasitic impedances between the generated reference voltage and the corresponding EA introduced by the distribution wires. The impedance of the distribution wires among different VRs can be different. Also, there can be VR components and control loop mismatches. Considering these effects, simulations are performed by introducing wire resistances and capacitances as well as VR components, and the loop delay mismatches to justify the effectiveness of the proposed method. The 1-mm distribution wire is assumed in the simulations. Based on the IBM 130 nm process, the parasitic resistance and capacitance are, respectively, around 70Ω and 230 fF . A 10% mismatch is introduced among each VR regarding distribution wire impedance, L , C , R_{DCR} , R_{ESR} , $Q1$, and $Q2$ size. The 5-ns control loop delay difference is introduced among each phase. The simulation results for three phases are shown in Fig. 19. As can be seen from the simulation results, the proposed method is immune to these mismatches.

VII. CASE STUDY: IBM POWER8-LIKE MICROPROCESSOR

A. Benchmarks

All the benchmarks used in the simulations are from SPLASH2x [37]. The benchmarks experimented represent typical application domains and features. Eight threads are involved in the simulations and analysis is limited to the region-of-interest of the benchmarks.

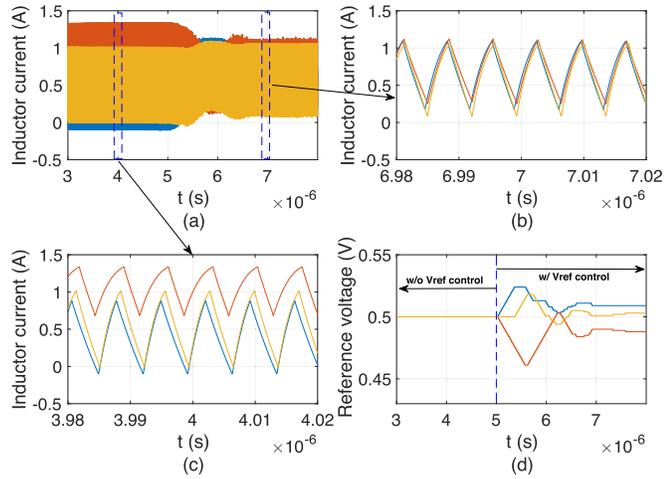


Fig. 19. Simulation results with and without the proposed adaptive V_{ref} control scheme for three distributed on-chip VRs under distribution wire and VR mismatches. (a) Inductor currents before and after the proposed V_{ref} control is applied. (b) Zoomed-in view of balanced CS showing the effectiveness of the proposed V_{ref} control method under distribution wire and VR mismatches. (c) Zoomed-in view of unbalanced CS without the proposed V_{ref} control. (d) V_{ref} s signal change showing the operation of the proposed V_{ref} control method.

B. Architecture

An IBM POWER8-like [17] processor is modeled to quantitatively characterize unbalanced CS effects. The technology and architecture parameters of the processor are summarized in Table I. The schematic of a core is shown in Fig. 20(a), which contains a private L2, an instruction scheduling unit, an execution unit, a load store unit (LSU), and an instruction fetch unit (IFU). L1 data cache is a part of LSU, while L1 instruction cache resides inside IFU. Fig. 20(b) shows the whole chip floor plan, which contains 8 cores, 96 identical on-chip regulators, shown as little squares, network-on-chip, and memory controller.

C. Simulation Framework

Dynamic power traces are collected by integrating MR2 [38] version of McPAT [39] into SNIPER6.0 [40] microarchitectural simulator. Then, we calculate the static power of each unit based on its temperature and area. We use the equation from [41] to capture temperature dependence of static power. The static power of the whole chip is calibrated in a way that it takes less than 30% of the total chip power at 80 °C. Hotspot6.0 [42] is used to find the transient temperature across the chip. Transient temperature (output of Hotspot) is used to calculate the static power (input to Hotspot). So, we iteratively run Hotspot and update the static power numbers until they converge. Default parameters of Hotspot are used. VoltSpot is deployed to capture the current distribution among VRs at different locations and the method from [18] is followed to generate cycle-accurate power traces. One sample contains 2K cycles and 200 samples are obtained with equal distance for each application. The first 1K cycles are used for warm-up and the rest for analysis. The four clock cycles are used as the power trace sampling interval.

TABLE I
TECHNOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE PARAMETERS

Technology Parameters	
Technology node: 22nm, Frequency: 4.0GHz	
TDP: 150W, Area: 441mm ² , Vdd: 1.03V	
Architecture Parameters	
# cores: 8	
issue width: 8	
64 architected FRF, 32 architected IRF	
L1-I cache: 32KB, 8-way, 64B, LRU, 1-cycle hit	
L1-D cache: 64KB, 8-way, 64B, LRU, 1-cycle hit	
L2 cache: 512KB, 8-way, 128B, LRU, 11-cycle hit	
L3 cache: 64MB, 8-way, 128B, LRU, 30-cycle hit	

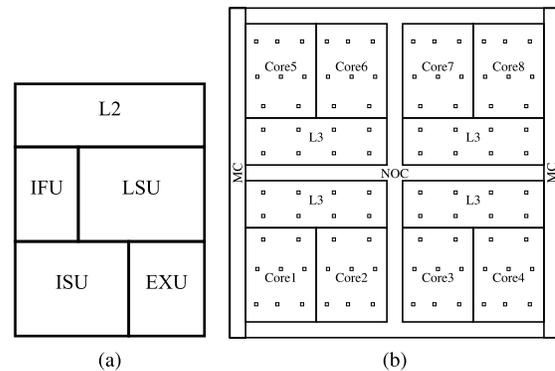


Fig. 20. Chiptlet simplified floorplan. (a) Core. (b) Chip.

D. Power Grid and Voltage Regulator Properties

In VoltSpot configurations, the on-chip power grid is designed as a resistive mesh using similar metal width, pitch, and thickness parameters in [21] for the global, intermediate, and local PDN layers. The unit power grid resistance is around 8 m Ω and the total power grid size is 345 \times 345. The effective resistance between any two nodes can be estimated using the equations in [19] and [20].

LDOs used in IBM POWER8 microprocessor and fully integrated voltage regulators (FIVRs) used in the Intel Haswell microprocessor are two state-of-the-art on-chip power delivery solutions. It is demonstrated in [13] that the FIVR-based power delivery scheme is more advantageous with large number of cores due to high efficiency over a wide conversion ratio. The gaining impetus and benefits of distributed on-chip voltage regulation together with the advantages of FIVR motivate us to investigate distributed buck regulators in the simulation setups.

The 96 identical on-chip VRs, with the area of each as 0.04 mm², are used in the simulations to distribute across the chip as shown in Fig. 20(b). The optimal placement of LDOs is first investigated in [43] to meet the IR-drop constraint. To avoid any adversely biased analysis in our simulations, we mimic the algorithm proposed in [44] where a voltage-noise-minimizing technique is proposed to determine the locations of the C4 pads across several benchmarks. We use this algorithm to determine the optimal locations of the on-chip VRs that would minimize the voltage noise. Since the resulting maximum voltage noise only decreases by less than 0.4% with the optimal placement as compared with

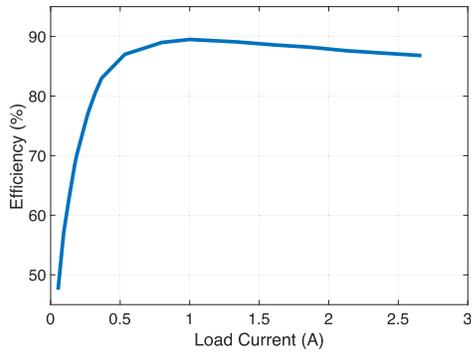


Fig. 21. Calibrated efficiency curve for the on-chip VR.

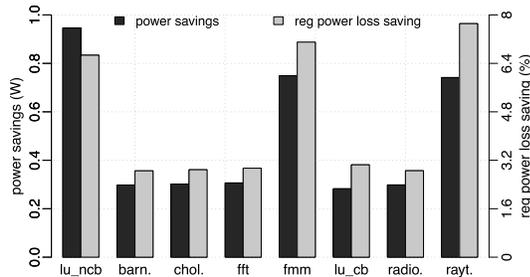


Fig. 22. Power saving and regulator power loss saving with balanced CS for different applications.

the uniform distribution, we adopt the uniform placement of the VRs to simplify the analysis. These on-chip regulators are calibrated to match the conversion efficiency of FIVR design in the Intel's Haswell processor [27] as it is one of the most efficient regulators in industry. Efficiency curves in [27] are picked for calibration and each VR provides around 1-A load current with the optimum efficiency of about 90%. The calibrated efficiency curve is shown in Fig. 21. The on-chip VR is modeled as an ideal supply voltage in series with an RLC network in VoltSpot [18] simulations. Simpler RL and RC -based models have previously been used, respectively, in [1], [45], and [46] to model VRs. The proposed adaptive V_{ref} control method can be applied to balance the CS.

Simulation results showing the power saving and regulator power loss saving with balanced CS for different applications are shown in Fig. 22. Power saving up to 1 W and VR power loss saving up to 8% are observed. Note that balancing the current may lead to extra power losses on the power-grid resistors. The total gained power saving is due to the fact that the power saving induced by balanced CS can be much larger than the extra power loss consumed on the power grid resistors. For a general case of N distributed VRs, a total load current NI_{o_opt} with any CSR_i ($i = 1, \dots, N$) for the i th VR, when CSR_i varies further from the balanced CS point, balanced CS may introduce more loss on the power-grid parasitic resistors; however, balanced CS-induced power saving also increases as can be seen from Fig. 6 and (9). With large number of VRs deployed, distributed load currents are supplied by adjacent VRs, which effectively reduces the distance VR output currents travel to balance others. Furthermore, effective resistance between two nodes on the power grid does not increase linearly with distance [19], [20]. Even with quite

large distance, effective resistance can be only a few times of the unit power-grid resistance. All these factors contribute to the power savings seen from Fig. 22. More importantly, with balanced CS, VR malfunctions can be avoided and stability and reliability are enhanced.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Efficiency, stability, and reliability implications of unbalanced CS among distributed on-chip VRs are investigated in this paper both theoretically and through extensive simulations. A current balancing scheme that can be applied to most regulator types is proposed in this paper. A simple relationship between the individual VR output current and its corresponding V_{ref} is identified for balanced CS. And an adaptive V_{ref} control method based on the relationship is proposed. The proposed method generates and modulates V_{ref} for each regulator to balance the output current. The implementation of the method is analyzed and simulations are presented to verify the effectiveness. Regulator power loss saving up to 8%, enhanced system stability, and several years of MTTF improvement are verified through practical case studies.

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