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## In tight Senate votes, McCain not a maverick

*When it matters the most, he seldom bucks his own party*

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Over the years, Sen. John McCain has publicly condemned Republican Party leaders and occasionally voted against the GOP on selected issues.

But an *Arizona Republic* analysis of his Senate votes on the most divided issues in the past decade shows that McCain almost never thwarted his party's objectives.

The presumptive Republican nominee arguably cast the decisive vote 14 times since 1999 to ensure Republicans got their way, and he had five other close cases where his vote may have made a difference, Senate records show. By comparison, McCain effectively handed Democrats a win on roll-call votes four times in the same period. On one of those occasions, Republicans could still have won if Vice President Dick Cheney had cast a tie-breaking vote.

The numbers are based on a review of Senate roll-call votes since 1999 that ended in a tie or were settled by one vote. The closest votes in that period included momentous, partisan-charged legislation, such as President Bush's tax cuts. More often, they were procedural votes on deal-breaking amendments to bills that would otherwise pass.

They partly reflect how rarely Senate votes come down to a single person, even though the chamber has been narrowly divided on party lines most of the past decade. But the votes also suggest that when McCain broke from Republicans, others often joined him, keeping the votes from being so close.

And his chronic absence in the Senate has seldom come in the most divided debates, the records show.

"Senator McCain puts the interests of Arizonans first and supports the principles of the Republican Party," said Crystal Benton, a spokeswoman for the campaign. "He also has the courage and the integrity to do what is right."

The voting pattern seems at odds with the popular narrative that McCain's maverick tendencies make him an unreliable conservative.

"He is a conservative who votes conservative on most issues," said Keith Poole, a political scientist at the University of California-San Diego. "By no means is he a liberal or even a moderate."

Poole, who compiles a widely respected analysis of all Senate votes, ranks McCain as slightly less conservative than most Republicans throughout his career and near the far edge of the right while running for president.

During the 10 years *The Republic* examined, McCain crossed over to vote with Democrats 19 times in 82 close votes. He did so just once in the four years he was running for president: 1999, 2000, 2007 and 2008. All 12 of the close votes he missed happened in those years, too.

Even so, in 59 of the 82 close votes, Republicans got what they wanted regardless of McCain's position. In those 59 cases, McCain broke with his party 16 times.

John Fortier, a research fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, said McCain has earned the maverick label often hung on him, but it is primarily built on issues that received considerable

attention, like campaign-finance reform or immigration.

"On most issues, he is broadly conservative," Fortier said. "He has a real streak of voting independently and sometimes makes a really big deal of it."

Others take issue with McCain's image as conservative gadfly.

A *Washington Post* analysis notes McCain voted with the GOP this term 88.3 percent of the time, the same as Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., whose conservative credentials are seldom questioned. McCain ranked ahead of 29 other Republicans, including Arizona's Jon Kyl, who holds the No. 2 spot in party leadership.

*Congressional Quarterly* gave McCain a 90 percent score for "party unity" voting last year and said he supported the president's position on legislation 95 percent of the time. During the Bush years, McCain's poorest totals from CQ were 67 percent party-unity voting in 2001 and 77 percent support for the Bush agenda in 2005.

Although McCain is largely in sync with the GOP, many conservatives cannot forget his defections on issues like the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts sought by Bush.

## **Complex partnership**

In some ways, three votes in 2003 illustrate the complex relationship McCain has with his party and the limited effect his resistance has had.

During a six-week span in the spring, McCain repeatedly voted with Democrats seeking to limit Bush's budget and tax-cut package that year. Even so, Cheney ensured the GOP prevailed on 51-50 votes each time.

The overall tax-cut legislation that year passed by two votes and over McCain's resistance.

These days, McCain travels the campaign trail vowing to make permanent those same temporary Bush tax cuts.

In 10 other cases in which the vice president broke a tie, McCain voted with the GOP every time.

In all the close votes, McCain clearly helped Democrats on just four occasions over the past decade.

In May 2006, for example, McCain and 10 other Republicans voted to put off an amendment offered by Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev. Democrats managed to fend off the amendment, which would have barred those who originally entered the U.S. illegally from receiving Social Security benefits for the work they did before becoming legal workers.

The amendment failed by a 50-49 vote with McCain's help. But, in the end, neither party managed to achieve significant changes to the nation's immigration laws.

## **Sealing GOP wins**

Over the past decade, McCain effectively sealed a Republican win on a variety of close votes 14 times.

In 1999, for example, McCain supported an amendment to a bill addressing crime by juveniles and gang

members. The amendment, offered by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, toughened gun-crime penalties and provided for background checks at gun shows. Seven Republicans opposed the amendment and another skipped the vote, but McCain sided with 46 others in his party to pass it by a single vote.

On five issues, McCain ensured a tie, allowing Cheney to settle matters with his vote.

There were six times that McCain didn't vote that ended in a tie. But here, too, it seems that McCain's absence had little impact on Republicans.

Two of the votes, held 20 minutes apart on March 2, 2000, involved resolutions that called on the Senate to pass legislation to reduce gun violence in public schools. In each case, most Republicans voted against the resolutions, and the eventual ties meant the measures failed.

Yet that same day, Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly passed a school-safety measure that referenced the gun violence.

Those close votes happened as McCain campaigned in the days before the decisive March primaries that led him to suspend his 2000 presidential bid.

Last year while campaigning in Michigan, McCain missed a tie vote on an amendment that sought to reduce conflicts of interest in panels advising the Food and Drug Administration. Most Republicans opposed the amendment, and with a tie vote it failed.

There were five close votes that are harder to categorize but generally didn't hurt the Republican agenda.

Three of them ended in a tie after McCain voted with his party for the measures in question. Cheney didn't vote to break the ties, however, so the party lost but can't blame McCain.

On two occasions, McCain didn't vote, effectively allowing the Democratic position to prevail.

But usually, McCain's vote had seemingly little effect on the ultimate outcome.

He voted with Republicans to extend research-and-development tax credits and define an unborn child. He and the GOP voted against creating a special Medicare reserve fund and changing the National Security Council.

He crossed Republicans to support offsetting new spending with budget cuts and supported a \$70 million communications upgrade for first-responders.

In each case, Republicans got their way in the end.