

MISSOURIAN

FACT CHECK: Is Claire McCaskill one of America's most independent senators?

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Trying to maintain her Senate seat in a historically red state, Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., has touted her voting record and bipartisan work as examples of her independence in one of her campaign ads.

"Nonpartisan experts have consistently ranked Claire one of the most independent senators — right in the middle," her campaign said in a TV ad.

Her Republican challenger, Attorney General Josh Hawley, is critical of her for often voting along party lines.

Does McCaskill follow party precedent, or does she often stray from the left side of the aisle when making her decisions?

Report cards, records, and rankings

McCaskill's ad cited Congressional Quarterly, her GovTrack Analysis records and National Journal ideology rankings to back up the claimed independent streak.

Here's what they said:

- Congressional Quarterly: The publication's analysis showed McCaskill was one of the least likely to vote in line with her own party, doing so 82 percent of the time in 2017. Only three senators, Angus King (81 percent), Joe Donnelly (74 percent) and Joe Manchin (64 percent), broke from their party during votes more often than McCaskill.
- GovTrack: GovTrack is a small, four-member organization that regularly publishes the status of federal legislation and information about representatives and senators in Congress. On the site's analytics page for McCaskill, the first metric displayed is her ideology chart. She is one of approximately 10 senators that rests ideologically close to the middle. GovTrack's report card for her 2017 legislative year ranked her the sixth most conservative Senate Democrat. She joined bipartisan bills the seventh most often of all senators.
- National Journal: Since 2007, her first year in office, McCaskill was ranked by National Journal as the 43rd, 52nd, 53rd, 48th, 51st, 57th and 50th most conservative member of the Senate, respectively, of the 100 members. National Journal stopped creating its ideology rankings in 2013, according to McCaskill's team.

Independent vs. moderate

We reached out to six political science experts to shed some light on what factors might qualify a senator as independent.

All but one of our experts noted that the wording of the claim is odd.

As Cato Institute research fellow and editor Jason Kuznicki noted, "'Moderate' and 'independent' are not synonyms." Only two senators are currently registered as independent — Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Angus King (I-Me.).

University of Missouri professor of American politics Marvin Overby said the claim was an exaggeration. "We live in an epoch where politics is very partisan and independent politicians are extraordinarily rare," he said. "But, comparatively speaking, it is fair to say that — in a hyper-partisan age — McCaskill shows more independence than most."

Our ruling

McCaskill said "nonpartisan experts have consistently ranked (her) one of the most independent senators — right in the middle."

It's difficult if not impossible to define independence. Multiple studies show McCaskill voted against her party more so than most other Democrats. However, experts cautioned that a moderate or centrist voting record does not necessarily equate to being independent.

For those reasons we rate this claim Half True.