Commentary | 1Q24

Voya Balanced Large Cap Core-Value SMA (Merrill Lynch)

Strategic Allocations to Actively Managed Equity and Fixed Income Assets

Strategy overview

A 55/45 equity/fixed income, multi-asset strategy providing exposure to the investment expertise of the Voya Investment Management equity and fixed income teams in a single strategy.

U.S. stocks enjoyed a strong first quarter as inflation's downward trend continued and U.S. economic growth beat expectations. The S&P 500 Index reached a new high and advanced by 10.56% on a total return basis during the quarter and the Nasdaq Composite had a price return of 9.11%. The communication services, energy and information technology sectors led, while real estate and utilities lagged. Large-cap stocks outperformed small caps and growth beat value. The Federal Open Market Committee voted to hold interest rates steady for the fifth consecutive time at its March meeting; however, three rate cuts are still expected this year, with the first likely to happen in June.

U.S. bonds slipped during the quarter amid persistently tight credit spreads and a rising U.S. Treasury yield curve. The Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index fell –0.78%. The 10-year U.S. Treasury yield rose from 3.95% in January to 4.20% by quarter end on early concerns that lingering high inflation could change the Fed's rate cut plans; however, it remained essentially flat in March following favorable comments from Fed Chair Powell.

The U.S. economy remains strong, with positive gains in payrolls and productivity. Consumer spending momentum appears soft but stable. Household net worth has increased significantly since the pandemic, but consumer confidence remains below long-term averages due to the lasting negative impact of higher prices on consumers' psyches. The U.S. labor market remains robust but shows signs of softening. While inflation has fallen to more manageable levels, concerns about overheating persist. Interest rates may remain higher for longer than some participants expect.

The economic soft landing and easier financial conditions, coupled with anticipated rate cuts, should create favorable conditions for U.S. stocks. Although a lot of price appreciation has already taken place and a near-term pullback is possible, there is significant potential for further rally once the Fed starts cutting rates.

Disclaimers

Principal risks: all investing involves risks of fluctuating prices and the uncertainties of rates of return and yield. As with any portfolio, you could lose money on your investment in the Voya Balanced Large Cap Core Value SMA. Stocks are more volatile than bonds, and portfolios with a higher concentration of stocks are more likely to experience greater fluctuations in value than portfolios with a higher concentration of bonds. Investing in bonds also entails credit risk and interest rate risk. The strategic allocation of the Voya Balanced Large Cap Core Value SMA is expected to remain constant; as a result, the SMA's performance will depend on the performance of the underlying investment strategies rather than tactical changes to its asset allocations. Market and asset class performance may differ in the future from historical performance and the assumptions used to form the strategic asset allocations for the Voya Balanced Large Cap Core Value SMA. There is risk that you could achieve better returns in an underlying portfolio or other portfolios representing a single asset class than in the Voya Balanced Large Cap Core Value SMA.

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