Commentary | 4Q24

Voya Balanced Large Cap Core-Value SMA (Merrill)

Strategic Allocations to Actively Managed Equity and Fixed Income Assets

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Strategy overview

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

Key takeaways

- In the fourth quarter of 2024, the equity markets experienced mixed returns. Domestic large- and small-cap stocks delivered positive returns, while value indices and international markets saw declines. Cyclical sectors, such as consumer discretionary, financials and technology, outperformed defensive sectors. Growth factors led performance, while value factors declined.
- The outlook for equities in 2025 is cautiously optimistic as the U.S. economy remains strong and the Trump administration is expected to implement favorable policies in terms of deregulation and taxes. However, risks such as tariffs, inflation and geopolitics may result in volatility.
- For the quarter ended December 31, 2024, the SMA outperformed the Index on a gross-of-fees basis due to favorable stock selection. Stock selection in the information technology, industrials and financials sectors contributed the most from performance. Conversely, selection within the communication services, health care and utilities detracted from performance.

Market review

U.S. stocks continued their upward trajectory during the fourth quarter following Donald Trump's presidential victory, with the S&P 500 Index rising by 2.41% and the Nasdaq Composite advancing by 6.17%. The consumer discretionary and communication services sectors led, while materials and healthcare lagged. Large cap stocks outperformed small caps, and growth stocks significantly beat value stocks.

The U.S. bond market struggled during the quarter on concerns about sticky inflation and the U.S. Federal Reserve's more conservative rate-cut path. The Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index declined by –3.06% and the 10-year U.S. Treasury yield rose by more than 80 basis points (bp), ending the quarter at 4.58%. The Fed cut rates by 25 bp in November and December. However, the central bank now projects just two rate cuts in 2025, reflecting a more cautious stance in response to strong economic data.

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Portfolio review

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At the individual stock level, our overweight positions in Broadcom Inc., Tapestry, Inc. and Salesforce, Inc. were among the SMA's largest contributors for the quarter. An overweight position in Broadcom Inc. (AVGO) contributed to performance this quarter. Fourth-quarter results drove strong performance in December, with a strong year-over-year revenue increase. An overweight position in Tapestry, Inc. (TPR) positively impacted performance. The stock appreciated following the announcement in November of the termination of the merger with Capri Holdings, along with the approval of a $2 billion share repurchase program. An overweight position in Salesforce, Inc. (CRM) contributed to performance. The company reported better than expected revenues and earnings in the period.

Not owning Tesla Inc., an overweight position in Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. and not owning Alphabet Inc. were among the SMA's largest distributors for the quarter. Not owning Tesla, Inc. (TSLA) detracted from performance. The stock rose significantly following 3Q24 earnings, driven by strong margins and profitability metrics, despite lower-than-expected revenue. Positive sentiment was further boosted by Tesla's plans for new vehicle launches, projected 20–30% delivery growth in fiscal year 2025, and the unveiling of its Robotaxi product. An overweight position in Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc. (TMO) detracted from performance. The stock declined following a disappointing earnings report. Additionally, the stock faced pressure after the election, as the incoming Trump administration was seen as potentially harmful to growth in the healthcare sector, with concerns over high China tariffs and reduced National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding. Not holding a position in combined shares of Alphabet, Inc. (GOOG) detracted from performance. The stock benefited from excitement around its quantum computing model, "Willow." Additionally, Waymo announced plans to expand its autonomous taxi service to Miami in 2026. Expectations for continued growth in Alphabet's cloud and YouTube businesses further boosted investor sentiment.

Outlook

After months of noise surrounding the U.S. presidential election, markets have now refocused on macroeconomic data, which offer mixed signals. Key concerns include global geopolitical tensions, especially around tariffs, and deteriorating sentiment tied to mega-cap positioning and broader market weakness. Despite these challenges, U.S. equities should continue to benefit from robust consumer spending, optimism around artificial intelligence and solid corporate earnings. U.S. inflation is projected at 2.5% for 2025, but the new administration's policies could reverse the disinflation trend.

Index returns do not reflect fees, brokerage commissions, taxes or other expenses of investing. Investors cannot invest directly in an index.

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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