

Q2 2024: To Cut or Not to Cut? That is the Question.

By Peak Trust Company's Chief Investment Officer, Lisa Russell, CFA.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- U.S. markets delivered mixed results in the second quarter. Large cap stocks climbed 4.3%, while small cap stocks declined 3.3%. Bonds ended the quarter up 0.1%.
- Despite market and Fed expectations for at least one interest rate cut this year, U.S. inflation remains above the Fed's 2% target.
- A handful of mega-cap technology stocks have contributed to most of the S&P 500's year-to-date gain of 15.3%, as market breadth remains narrow and tech sector valuations are at the high end of historical ranges.
- The fiscal situation remains precarious, as evidenced by a notable lack of fiscal responsibility in the recent presidential debates, which suggests a persistent lack of budgeting restraint.
- Despite these concerns, slowing growth and inflation appear enough to keep the bond market content, and yields remain relatively contained.

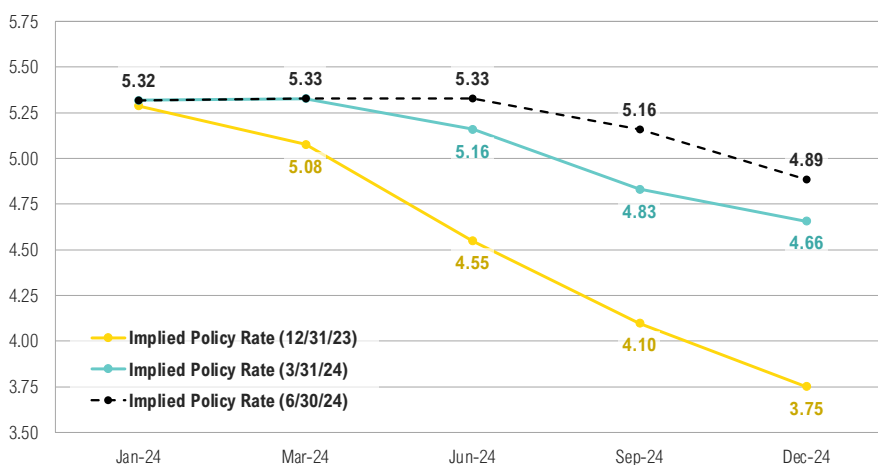
Overview

Equity markets delivered mixed results in the second quarter. U.S. large cap stocks climbed 4.3% over the quarter, bringing the S&P 500's year-to-date return up to 15.3%. In contrast, U.S. small cap stocks ended the quarter down 3.3%, and the Russell 2000 gained only a modest 1.7% year to date. This is only the tenth time since 1990 that the quarterly spread between U.S. large caps and U.S. small caps has exceeded 7.0%, and most of those times occurred in the lead-up to the tech bubble. The Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate Bond Index ended the quarter up 0.1% and finished the first six months of the year down 0.7%.

June marked the two-year anniversary since year-over-year U.S. inflation hit a

Market Expectations for Rate Cuts Have Notably Declined Since January

Implied Fed Funds Rate, %



Source: Bloomberg. FOMC projections are medians.

four-decade high of 9.1%. Since then, inflation has been on a rocky road back down to the Fed's 2% target (which it has yet to reach), dropping to 3.0% in June 2023 and slightly rising at the end of May 2024 to 3.3%. At the June Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting, the Federal Reserve opted to keep interest rates unchanged for the seventh consecutive meeting, and Fed chair Jerome Powell reiterated that the central bank did not yet have the necessary confidence to start cutting interest rates. Market expectations for interest rate cuts dramatically shifted over the first half of 2024: In January, markets expected the equivalent of seven rate cuts in 2024, but by June, markets were expecting only one to two cuts for this year.

First-quarter earnings results showed that S&P 500 companies fared better than analysts expected. Year-over-year earnings growth for the quarter rose from an expected 3.4% at the end of March to 5.9% at the end of June. For second-quarter earnings, the entire S&P 500 is expected to report year-over-year earnings growth of 8.8%, and full-year 2024 earnings growth estimates have now hit 11%. Eight of the 11 S&P 500 sectors reported year-over-year earnings growth, led by communication services at 34%, utilities at 32%, and information technology at 25%. A short list of companies, particularly in these sectors, continue to drive earnings growth and dominate market returns. For example, if Meta and Alphabet are excluded from the results, earnings growth in the communication services sector falls from 34% to just 1.8%.

Overall, the U.S. consumers remained resilient throughout the first half of 2024. Personal income data remained stable, increasing at an average month-over-month rate of 0.5% for the first five months of 2024 (the most recent data available), compared to the 0.4% average monthly increase for the first five months of 2023. This, along with consumer access to credit and buy-now-pay-later (BNPL) programs, suggests that consumer spending may be able to persist despite higher interest rates. However, consumer sentiment dropped notably over the past quarter. The University of Michigan's consumer sentiment index dropped from a two-year high of 79.4 at the end of March to 68.2 in June in its sharpest three-month fall since April 2022.

Consumers' willingness to spend appears intact given the solid labor market. Although the U.S. unemployment rate remains low, at 4.1%, it has slowly been trending higher, crossing above its 36-month moving average of 4.0% for the first time in four years—a trend that historically has been followed by a more noticeable increase in the jobless rate. Job openings climbed higher in May, to 8.1 million, from a downwardly revised 7.9 million in April. The May JOLTS report highlighted a notable development in the U.S. labor market: For every job seeker, there were still 1.22 job openings, which suggests some persistent tightness in the labor market.

Additional signs of softening economic data emerged over the second quarter. Final first-quarter GDP estimates showed that quarter-over-quarter annualized growth dropped

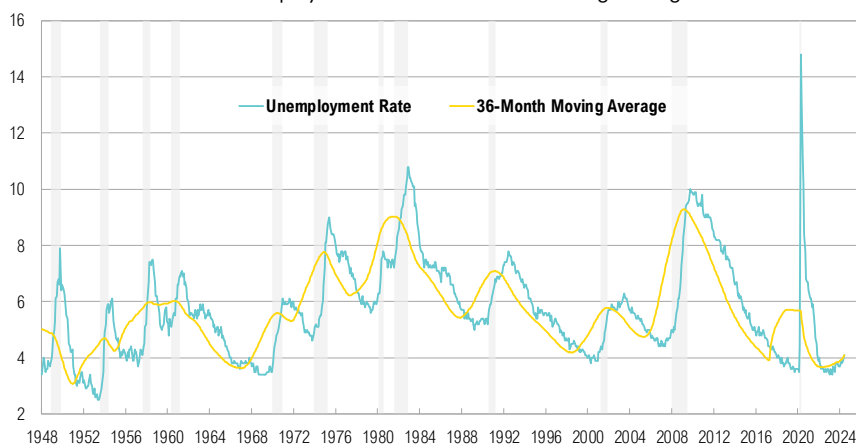
from 3.4% to 1.4%, and the consumer spending portion of GDP was revised down from 2.0% to 1.5%. Despite ongoing consumer spending, retail sales declined 0.2% month-over-month in April and rebounded only slightly in May, rising 0.1%. Moreover, the ISM Services PMI unexpectedly dropped back into contractionary territory in June, falling to 48.8 (less than 50 indicates a contraction), while the ISM Manufacturing PMI remained in contractionary territory in June. The services PMI declined primarily due to lower business activity, fewer new orders, and persistently high prices.

To Cut or Not to Cut

Despite a notable improvement from the four-decade high of 9.1% in June 2022, U.S. inflation remains well above the Fed's official 2% target, at 3.3%. While the Fed has maintained interest rates at 5.25% to 5.50% for nearly 12 months, other central

Historically Tight Labor Market has Started to Soften

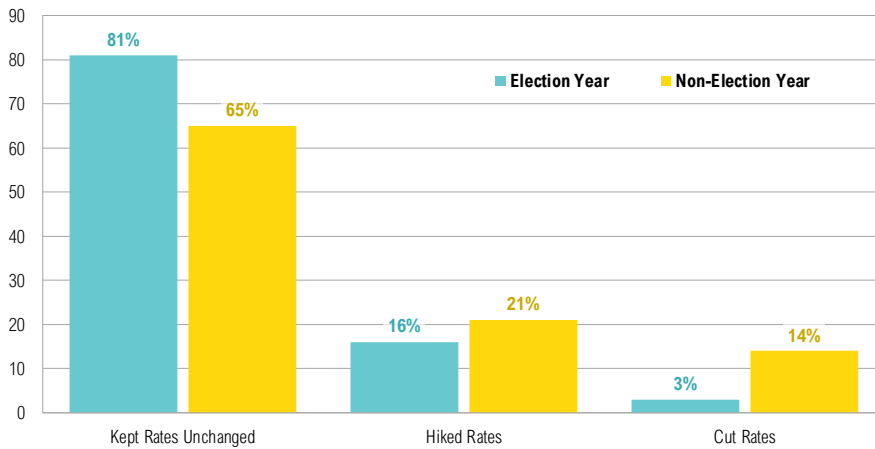
U.S. Unemployment Rate vs 36-Month Moving Average



Source: Bloomberg

The Fed Tends to Keep Interest Rates Unchanged as Election Day Nears

Average FOMC Rate Decision Between May and November (1994 – 2023), %



Source: Federal Reserve, Bespoke Investment Group. Analysis between 1/1/1994 and 8/31/2023.

banks worldwide have started to reduce rates. On April 3, the Swiss National Bank became the first G10 central bank to cut interest rates this cycle. On June 5, the Bank of Canada lowered interest rates by 25 basis points, and on June 6, the European Central Bank followed suit, marking the first rate cut since 2019. Over the quarter, many have appealed to the Fed to cut interest rates. Senator Elizabeth Warren on June 10 sent a letter to the Fed urging them to lower rates, and President Biden in April stated, “Well, I do stand by my prediction that, before the year is out, there’ll be a rate cut.”

Although the Fed’s economic projections have been revised downwards from two rate cuts to one rate cut for this year (and the year-end inflation rate has been revised upwards from 2.6% to 2.8%),

history shows that the Fed tends to prefer keeping rates unchanged as a presidential election day draws nearer. Between 1994 and 2023, the Fed kept interest rates unchanged 81% of the time in the six months leading up to election day and cut rates only 3% of the time—all during 2008. However, in September 2012, the Fed announced open-ended quantitative easing, a form of policy easing, so anything is possible. Also, at its May FOMC meeting, the Fed announced that it plans to taper quantitative tightening, which implies it will purchase approximately \$500 billion in Treasuries over the next 12 months.

Bolstered by mega-cap technology companies and continued enthusiasm surrounding artificial intelligence, the S&P 500 ended the second quarter up 4.3%. The technology sector fared best, gaining 14% over the quarter, followed by communication services, which gained 9%, and utilities companies, which ended the quarter up 5%. The Magnificent Seven—Apple, Microsoft, Meta, Alphabet, Amazon, Tesla, and Nvidia—have gained more than 35% year to date, compared to the 8% gain that the other 493 stocks in the S&P 500 have made. The narrowness is extreme. Only 17% of S&P 500 stocks outperformed the index in June, compared to the historical average of 49%, marking the lowest participation rate in at least a decade. Further, the correlation between the S&P 500 market cap and equal-weighted indices is among the lowest in 25 years. As unusual as the narrowness is, it is hard to argue that it isn’t at least partially justified by earnings growth trends. In 2023, the Magnificent Seven enjoyed year-over-year earnings growth

Tech Sector Price to Sales Ratio Ended June 40% Higher Than Tech Bubble Peak

S&P 500 Information Technology Sector, Price to Sales Ratio



Source: Bloomberg

of 19.3%, while the rest of the S&P 500 (or the S&P 493) saw earnings decline 1.4%.

The S&P 500 technology sector ended June at a 9.8x price-to-sales (P/S) ratio, which was 40% higher than the tech bubble peak of 7.0x. Similarly, the median S&P 500 technology stock ended June with a 6.6x P/S compared to 5.5x at the peak of the tech bubble. This market exuberance was further captured in investor sentiment: The Bank of America's Fund Manager Survey showed its most bullish sentiment since November 2021. Meanwhile, expectations for a global "hard landing" made new lows, and household stock allocations hit 70-year highs of 34.5%.

The precarious fiscal situation in the U.S. continues. The fiscal year-to-date budget deficit has reached \$1.2 trillion. On June 18, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) revised the expected fiscal budget deficit upwards to \$1.9 trillion (or 6.7% of GDP)—a 27% increase from its original February estimate of \$1.5 trillion. This level of deficit spending is more akin to an economy in recession or one dealing with a global pandemic. Net interest outlays, which are projected to increase significantly, are expected to constitute a growing share of the deficit—rising from \$650 billion in 2023 to \$892 billion in 2024—and they are expected to increase to \$1.7 trillion by 2034. Unadjusted for inflation, the U.S. is expected to add as much debt in the next decade as it did from 1789 to 2021. A key takeaway from the recent presidential debate, held on June 27 between President Biden and former President Trump, was the lack of focus on fiscal responsibility. Neither candidate proposed measures for budget restraint, likely reinforcing the recent CBO projections for an escalating fiscal budget deficit.

Bond markets have remained stable despite higher inflation and continued fiscal spending. Throughout the quarter, yields were relatively contained. The yield curve shifted higher in April on hotter-than-expected inflation data, but it flattened again following a series of softer economic data prints over the last two months of the quarter, specifically when lower first-quarter GDP revisions and ISM PMIs dropped into contractionary territory. The 10-year Treasury yield ended the quarter at 4.4%, and the 2-year Treasury yield ended the quarter at 4.7%.

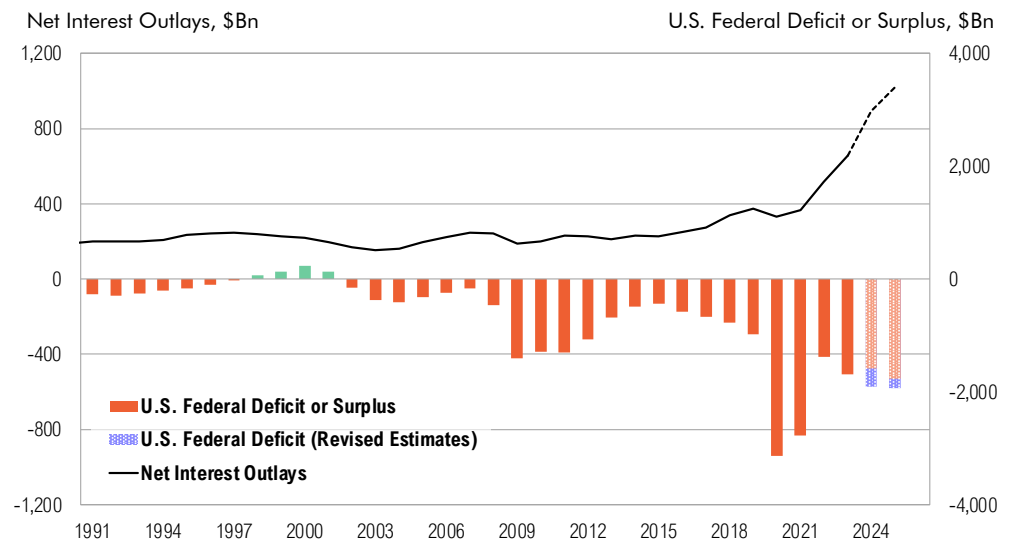
Treasury yields jumped higher in the closing days of the quarter, likely due to concerns over the fiscal implications of a possible Republican sweep in November. History shows that budget deficits tend to expand when one party controls both the Congress and the White House. Increased deficits (which seem inevitable, at least in the shorter term) could lead to an increased supply of bonds and may put downward pressure on Treasury prices. Despite these concerns, slowing growth and inflation appear to be enough to keep the bond market content and yields relatively contained.

Markets

In equity markets, emerging and frontier market stocks were the top performers, gaining 5.1% over the quarter. Bolstered by a handful of mega-cap tech companies, U.S. large cap stocks ended the quarter up 4.3%. U.S. small cap stocks were the worst-performing equities, ending the quarter down 3.3%. U.S. intermediate-term bonds ended the quarter up 0.1% but down 0.7% year to date.

Gold ended the second quarter up 5.5%, reaching a new record high of \$2,446 per ounce on May 20. After dropping to

CBO Revised 2024 Fiscal Budget Deficit Projections Upwards by 27%, to \$1.9Tn



\$73.2 per barrel on June 4, West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude ended the quarter at \$81.5 per barrel. Gas prices, which had been slowly declining after peaking at \$3.80 per gallon on April 22, ticked higher as oil surpassed \$80 per barrel, and the national average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas ended June at \$3.60 per gallon.

The Japanese yen reached its lowest levels in nearly four decades on June 28, declining to ¥161 against the U.S. dollar. Over 60 countries will hold general elections during 2024, and more than two billion people are registered to vote this year. In France, the first round of snap elections, held on June 30, led to protests. The MSCI France Index ended the quarter down 7.5%, in part due to election uncertainty.

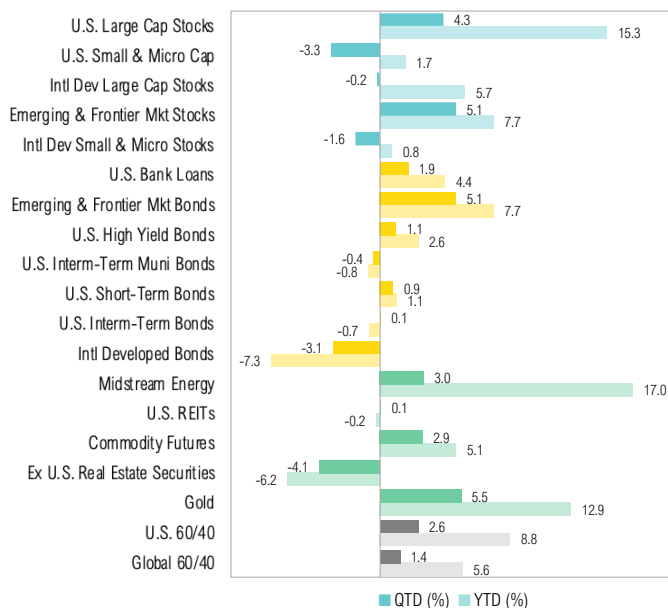
Looking Forward

Capital markets have been in risk-on mode since the Fed's pivot in December 2023. Since then, U.S. large cap stocks have gained 19.1%, and U.S. intermediate-term bonds have seen only a 2.1% increase, highlighting the trade-offs associated with a looser approach to inflation. Although elements of this market environment seem unsustainable, there is no reason the current unusual dynamics cannot continue as long as the underlying conditions—such as crisis-level fiscal spending, an implicitly higher inflation target, the tapering of quantitative tightening, a stable labor market, and decent economic growth—continue. As long as these factors are maintained and longer-term bond yields remain stable, the economy and markets will have sufficient liquidity to function, and investors may continue to favor mega-cap growth companies, regardless of their valuations, at the expense of other areas of the market. Garden-variety corrections will occur and are very welcome in overheated, concentrated markets. If any of the above-mentioned factors falter, the garden-variety correction could become more serious as a recession could be looming.

A bond allocation should once again resume the role as a hedge and protect a portfolio from major drawdowns.

With limited political will from both the Democratic and Republican parties to cut spending, looser fiscal policy could continue to impede the Fed's efforts to bring inflation back to 2%, while also increasing the U.S. debt burden. Ultimately, the bond market may serve as the final arbiter in determining when this slow-motion crisis reaches a critical point. While a rotation to broader equity market breadth would be welcome, as there are attractive opportunities around the world, predicting the exact timing of such a rotation is impossible. For now, the status quo may continue—that is, until it doesn't.

Q2 2024 Key Market Total Returns



Source: Bloomberg

About Lisa

Lisa Russell started with Peak Trust Company in 2003 and currently serves as Chief Investment Officer. Lisa brings over 25 years of investment experience to the Peak team. She specializes in designing unique investment programs for high-net-worth clients and trust accounts. She is highly attuned to the tax consequences of investment actions.

Lisa holds a Master of Business Administration in Finance from Emory University and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from the University of Southern California. Lisa holds the designation of Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), and is a member of the CFA Institute and the CFA Society of Seattle.



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