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## Driving Powell's Roadster

### Key Takeaways

- **Central Banks Spur Equity Market Gains:** US shares hit a new record high Thursday. The two more-dovish-than-expected central bank policy actions, along with Fed Chairman Powell's steadfast comments that economic growth would not stop the US central bank from easing, helped boost equity markets. The Swiss National Bank was the first major central bank to lower borrowing costs with others expected to follow suit. While the Bank of Japan moved in the other direction, its impact was muted.
- **The Bull Market is Not Aging, it is Broadening:** It has been said that an aging bull market tends to "narrow out" as it reaches its peak. We see the opposite happening in markets today. More US and global equities are breaking out of trading ranges, in line with our expectation that 9 out of 11 sectors have the potential to post Earnings per Share (EPS) gains in 2024.
- **Diversification Can be Beneficial:** The US equity market has risen from about a 50% share of the developed world's market cap to 70% in the last 15 years. While this may be sustainable, we are highly doubtful that the US will rise to 90% in the coming 15 years, which means there may be little to lose from diversifying across sectors and regional markets.

### Potential Portfolio Implications

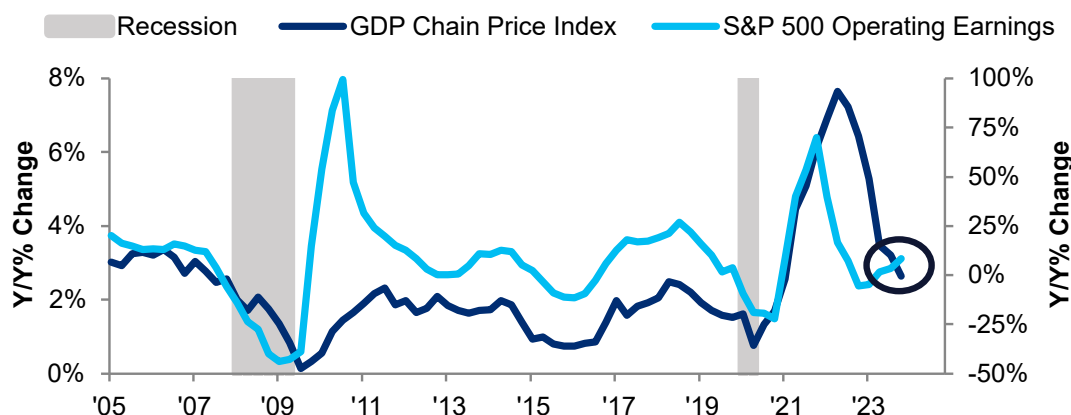
Even though Artificial Intelligence (AI) related investment spending and demand for services is only in its early stages, in our view the time for "chasing performance" in just a few stocks has passed.

With markets broadening, portfolio diversification may be both profitable and risk-reducing. Sector and geographic diversification seek to mitigate risk and potentially allows investors to benefit from wider earnings gains across more sectors. It also may reduce volatility from momentum-driven share corrections.

# Driving Powell's Roadster

This is an unusually positive time for markets. Inflation is slowing while corporate profits are rebounding (**FIGURE 1**). The Fed is proactively shifting policy to protect the US expansion. In fact, the Fed forecasts three years of uninterrupted economic growth as it lowers its key policy rate from +/-5.25% to 3.1% by the end of 2026. All of this is consistent with our bullish [2024 Wealth Outlook](#).

**FIGURE 1:** Inflation Slowing, Corporate Profits Beginning to Rebound Simultaneously



Source: Haver Analytics as of March 22, 2024. Circled area shows gains for Earnings per Share (EPS) with Inflation slowing. Indices are unmanaged. An investor cannot invest directly in an index. They are shown for illustrative purposes only and do not represent the performance of any specific investment. Index returns do not include any expenses, fees, or sales charges, which would lower performance. **Past performance is no guarantee of future results.** Real results may vary.

## The Negative Consensus was Very, Very Wrong

Just two years ago, financial markets were gripped in panic that the “easy money era was at an end.” Investors believed the post-pandemic economic recovery was as good as over. Doom and gloom for both stocks and bonds gave way to a robust market boom that is now broadening.

The now record-long period of yield curve inversion is producing no signs of an imminent recession. In this recovery, the shape of the yield curve has had little predictive value for employment or output growth.

In the aftermath of rapid monetary tightening, inflation has slowed sharply across the world. Most of this is due to the “unclogging” of supply chains (improving supply and modest global demand) rather than central bank rate hikes. But regardless of the catalyst, the meaningful drop in inflation has stabilized the world economy. And lower inflation raises confidence in the future path for economic growth in the US and globally.

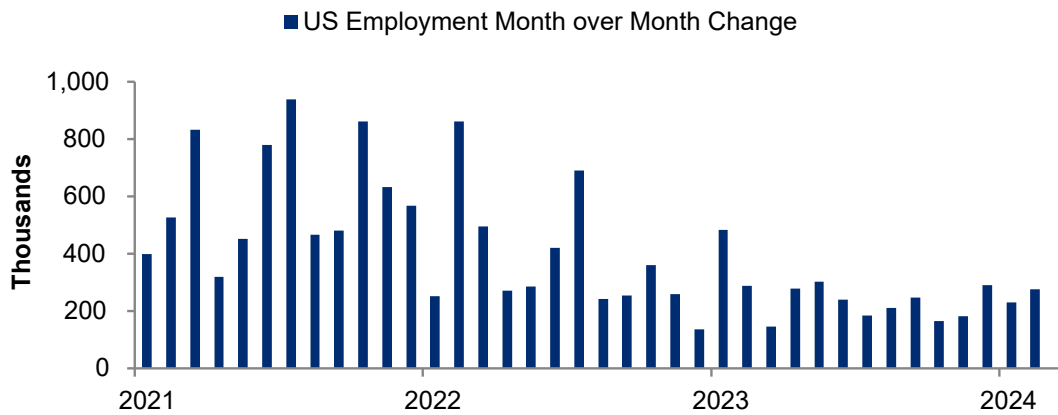
## Rolling Recessions Rolling Out

We have seen many sectors suffer due to higher rates. With yields back at pre-2008 levels, housing market activity has suffered a sharp drop. Even after a modest recovery, US existing home sales remain 34% below their COVID-era peak. Imports are just beginning to show net growth, while signs of a US industrial recovery are incipient. To us, this looks like the end of a recessionary trough rather than an impending business cycle peak. Such is the contradictory nature of this desynchronized, post-pandemic recovery.

The US labor market is positioned differently. Despite some stronger-than-expected headlines, the rate of US employment growth is clearly slowing. In 2021, US net job gains were 6.6 million. In 2022, net hiring slowed to 4.9 million. Last year, there were 2.9 million new jobs (**FIGURE 2**). Unfilled job openings have fallen from a high level.

So far, there has been no net decline in employment and the Fed would like to keep it that way. This is why Chairman Powell is telegraphing forward-looking policy steps. The Fed is projecting rate cuts in 2024 and beyond because it believes its current monetary stance will eventually damage employment growth and stall the economy.

**FIGURE 2:** Trend of US Employment Gains Is Slowing



Source: Haver Analytics as of March 22, 2024.

### From “Waiting for Doomsday” to “Fear of Missing Out”

When markets are weak, they are likely to be filled with potential opportunity. Rare, simultaneous one-year US equity and bond market declines have been a strong indicator for prospective returns – and not just for one-year, but for two-years thereafter. As we discussed in our November 2023 [Quadrant](#), there have been 41 cases of joint declines in the S&P 500 and 10-year US Treasury returns over rolling 12 months periods (note, just three are full *calendar* years, including 2022). All 41 events had positive returns.

Yet, following significant market declines, we see a strong tendency for investors to sit on the sidelines. This remains the case today. There is another bad tendency to avoid now, too. That is for investors to chase further returns from the assets that have had the strongest recent performance.

### Broadening Is Diversifying

It has been said that an aging bull market tends to “narrow out” as it reaches its peak. We see the opposite happening in markets today. More US and global equities are breaking out of trading ranges, in line with our expectation that more sectors will post EPS gains in 2024 than in 2023. Last year, about half of the S&P 500 sectors saw their EPS shrink ([FIGURE 3 & 4](#)). This year, nine of eleven are expected to post gains.

Tactically, during the past two years, we have been emphasizing sectors that are US-focused. This includes being overweight in assets like US small and mid-cap stocks (SMID) growth, Cybersecurity (through late February) and now US healthcare equipment. Yet, we may not always have a tactical US preference.

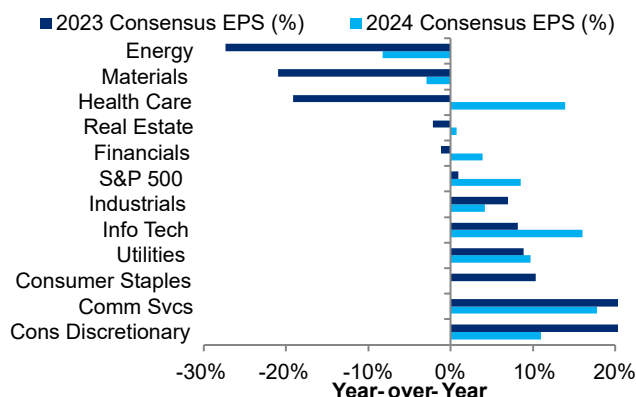
More of the world’s equity markets are posting positive returns ([FIGURE 5](#)). And since 4Q of last year, global diversification has minimally hampered performance in a rising market. The potential benefits of global diversification may return more clearly over the next 24 months, in our view.

**FIGURE 3: Share of NYSE Equities Above their 200 Day Average Price**



Source: Bloomberg as of March 19, 2024.

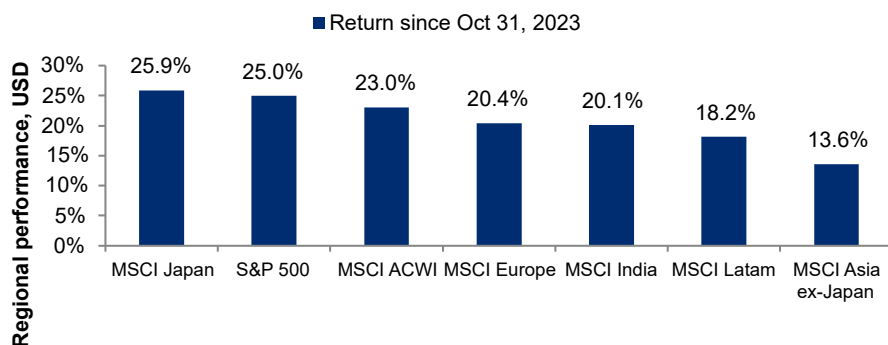
**FIGURE 4: S&P 500 Sector EPS Gains/Declines: 2023 vs 2024 Consensus<sup>1</sup> Expectation**



Source: Bloomberg as of March 19, 2024. Sectors proxied using S&P 500 indices. All forecasts are expressions of opinion and are subject to change without notice and are not intended to be a guarantee of future events.

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**FIGURE 5: Select Regional Equity Market Returns in USD: 4Q 2023-To Date**



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## Following Powell's Lead

Many key central banks are beginning to shift policies in the same direction as the Fed's expected path. The Swiss National Bank was the first to cut interest rates last week.

The Bank of Japan, with its highly divergent approach of staying ultra-accommodative throughout the period of high inflation, has finally moved in the other direction. It has taken its policy rate above zero, albeit barely (+0.05%-0.10%). For us, the most interesting aspect of the BoJ's action is the ultra-mild impact it has had. Japanese government bond yields fell slightly, as did US Treasury yields.

US shares hit a new record high Thursday. The two more-dovish-than-expected central bank policy actions, along with Fed Chairman Powell's steadfast comments that economic growth would not stop the US central bank from easing, helped boost equity markets.

<sup>1</sup> The consensus rating is based on analyst recommendations and compiled by Bloomberg reporters and researchers around the world. For more information, please see [https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.utdallas.edu/dist/8/1090/files/2021/03/bloomberg\\_commands.pdf](https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.utdallas.edu/dist/8/1090/files/2021/03/bloomberg_commands.pdf)

## Lessons From the Past: Avoid Market Timing and Performance Chasing

Many times, over the past three decades of guiding investors, we have seen clients lose patience and focus solely on the recent past. This is particularly true now when US investors have seen large gains in a handful of technology leaders and little benefit from global diversification.

History shows investors can sometimes overpay for any asset, even when fundamentals are positive. Consider the case of the late 1990s. Massive gains in a leading networking equipment provider's shares were unwound even though the impact of the internet still grew exponentially. Shares that fell sharply in the late 1990s, such as Apple and Microsoft, went on to much greater success years later, but they were not immune to the euphoric booms and busts of the time.

Right now, looking at the “Magnificent 7”<sup>2</sup> US large-cap tech stocks, only one has added significant alpha (outperformance after accounting for asset class risk) when measured since early 2022.

Our point here is that while we remain bullish on US large cap-tech and don't see excesses in investment spending as was the case in the early 2000s, we must not become blind, momentum-driven investors. While there is historical precedent for even larger gains for some US tech stocks, the “momentum style” of investing is at risk of peaking.

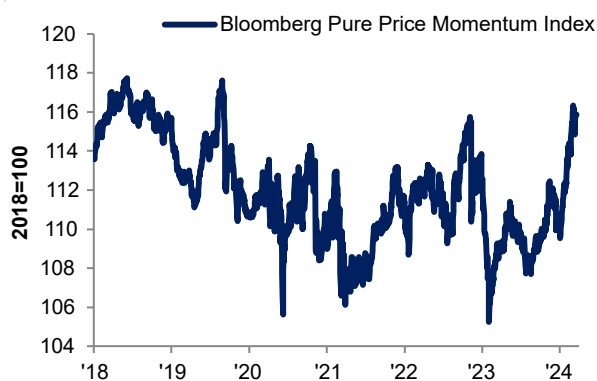
### Too Much Exuberance and What to Do About It

The Bloomberg Momentum Factor Index, which is long shares that have gained the most and short those that have weakened, is no longer rising (**FIGURE 6**). We see this as a near-term risk for investors who are tempted to pile in for fear of missing out. Short-term traders are apt to take profits in shares that have appreciated the most once those share prices stop rising. This trading pattern has little to do with fundamentals.

Our view is that with markets broadening, we should steer portfolios toward greater diversification. This seeks to mitigate risks while potentially benefiting from wider earnings gains across more sectors. It may reduce volatility from momentum-driven share corrections. Even though Artificial Intelligence-related investment spending and demand for services is only in its early stages, the time for “chasing performance” in just a few stocks has passed.

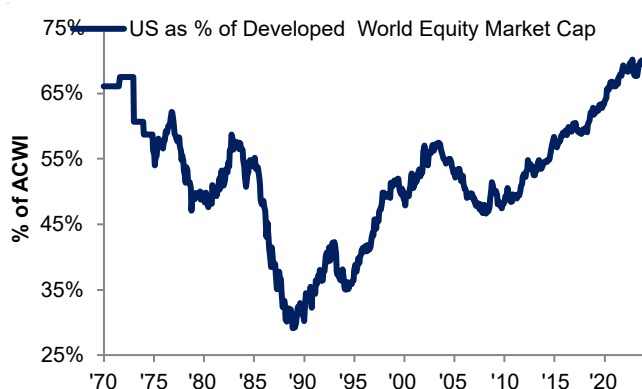
The US equity market has risen from about a 50% share of the developed world's market cap to 70% over the last 15 years (**FIGURE 7**). While this may be sustainable, we are highly doubtful that the US will rise to 90% in the coming 15 years. If we are right, there may be benefits from boosting portfolio diversification both in the near term or the longer term.

**FIGURE 6:** Bloomberg Price Momentum Equity Style Index



Source: Bloomberg as of March 19, 2024.

**FIGURE 7:** US Share of Developed World Equity Market Cap



Source: Bloomberg as of March 19, 2024. US and DM proxied using MSCI USA and MSCI World indices.

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<sup>2</sup> The Magnificent 7 stocks include Amazon.com (AMZN), Apple (AAPL), Google parent Alphabet (GOOGL), Meta Platforms (META), Microsoft (MSFT), Nvidia (NVDA) and Tesla (TSLA). The securities or company names included herein are for illustrative purposes only and do not constitute a recommendation of or solicitation to purchase or sell any security.

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	Moody's <sup>1</sup>	Standard and Poor's <sup>2</sup>	Fitch Rating <sup>2</sup>
<b>Credit risk</b>			
<b>Investment Grade</b>			
Highest quality	Aaa	AAA	AAA
High quality (very strong)	Aa	AA	AA
Upper medium grade (Strong)	A	A	A
Medium grade	Baa	BBB	BBB
<b>Not Investment Grade</b>			
Lower medium grade (somewhat speculative)	Ba	BB	BB
Low grade (speculative)	B	B	B
Poor quality (may default)	Caa	CCC	CCC
Most speculative	Ca	CC	CC
No interest being paid or bankruptcy petition filed	C	D	C
In default	C	D	D

1 The ratings from Aa to Ca by Moody's may be modified by the addition of a 1, 2, or 3, to show relative standing within the category.

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- volatility of returns;
- restrictions on transferring interests in the Fund;
- potential lack of diversification and resulting higher risk due to concentration of trading authority when a single advisor is utilized;
- absence of information regarding valuations and pricing;
- complex tax structures and delays in tax reporting;
- less regulation and higher fees than mutual funds; and
- manager risk.

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