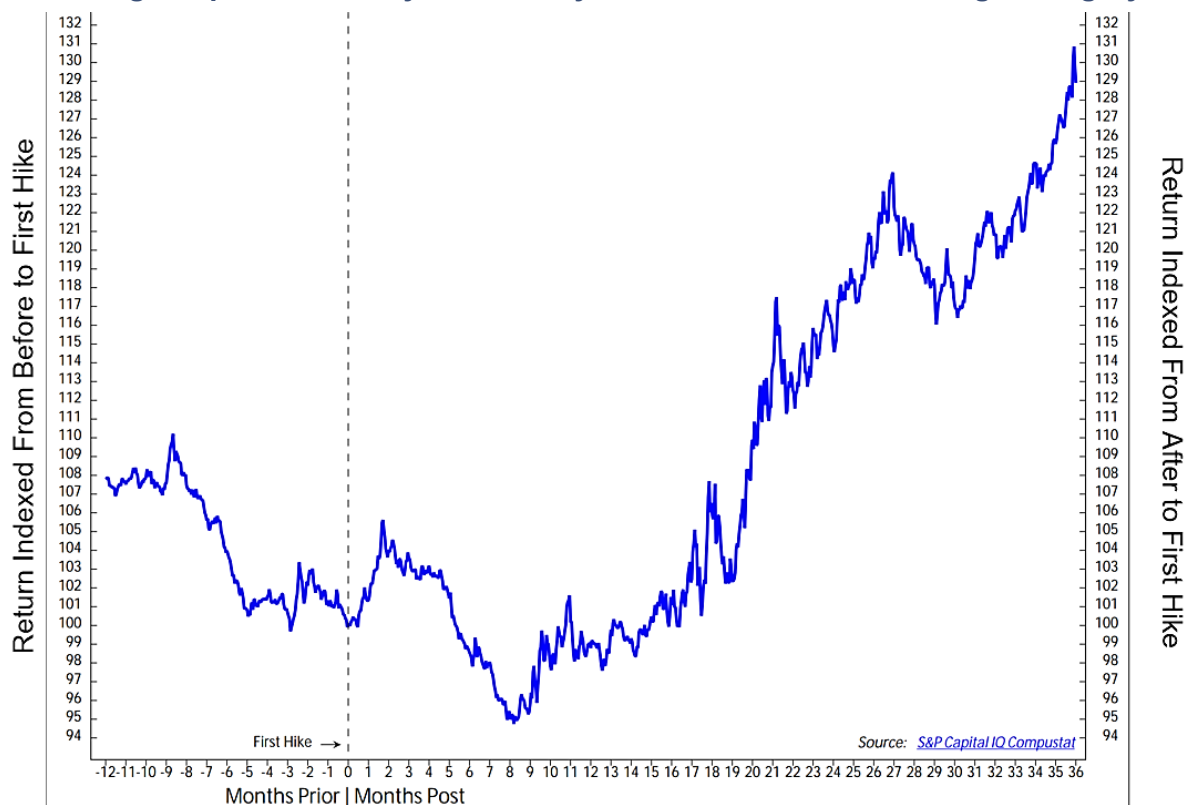


Seeking Dividend Advantage

The Lead | January 2024

NDR Large-Cap Dividend Payers/Non-Payers Ratio Around Start of Tightening Cycle



Source: Ned Davis Research.

The start of a new year can be a time for new beginnings and resolutions. We applaud those who start the year with a plan to improve themselves. Unfortunately, by mid-February, 80% of people will struggle with keeping their New Year's resolutions, according to U.S. News and World Report.

We strive to help clients achieve their financial goals by seeking an advantaged position. How can we position clients in an advantageous spot from day one? We believe the answer is by owning stocks whose companies have a track record of paying cash dividends on a regular basis and growing that corporate dividend throughout the year. That gives us a high degree of confidence in a portfolio of stocks that will pay the same current dividend rate on our holdings. By owning a collection of high-quality dividend payers, we might be able to expect more cash deposited in our accounts as the year progresses.

For over 20 years, we have believed that past performance of paying dividends could be the best indicator of future results. That is why any potential purchase within the Sterling Capital Equity Income strategy needs to have a track record of paying rising dividends three years in a row or six of the last ten years. In addition, we look for those holdings to pay increasing dividends over time.

Perhaps this higher certainty of receiving dividends that contribute to an investor's total return is why dividend growth stocks have performed well in the later stages of a Federal Reserve interest rate tightening cycle, as seen in the chart above. As higher rates can place pressure on corporate borrowing costs and growth rates, we believe the allure of receiving growing current cash flows from dividends can be attractive.

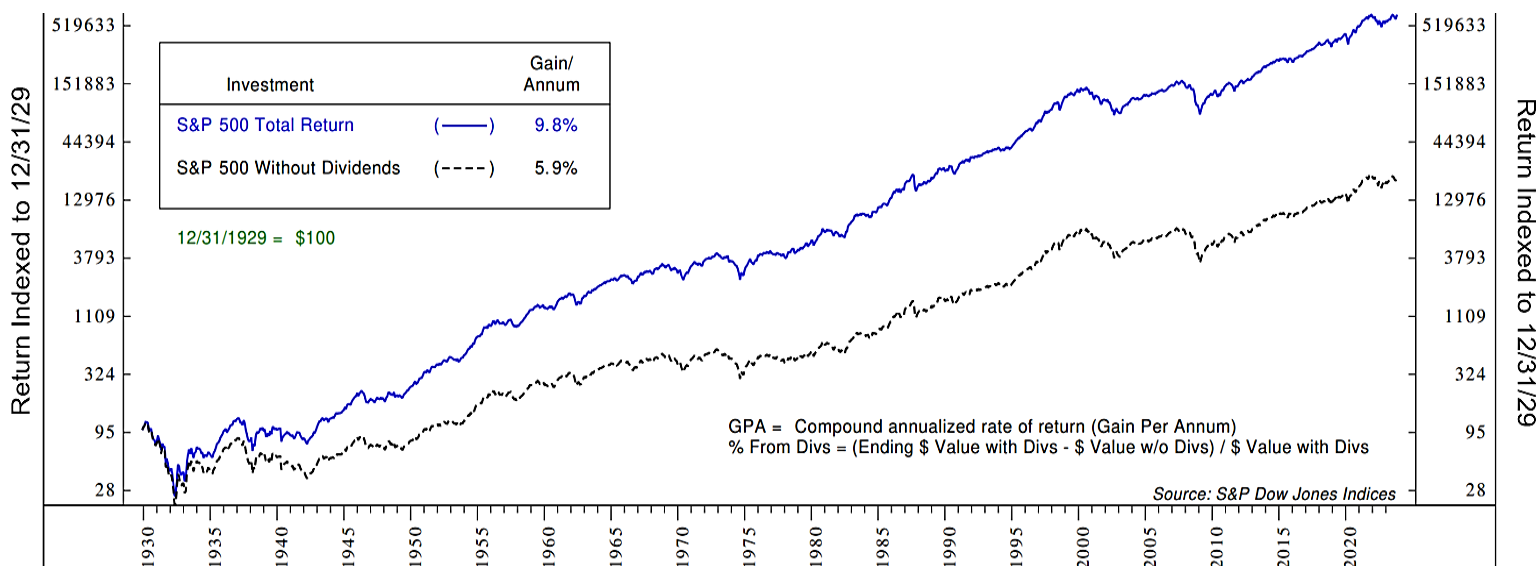
Past performance is not indicative of future results. Any type of investing involves risk and there are no guarantees that these methods will be successful. Charts are for illustrative purposes only.



Seeking Dividend Advantage

The Lead | January 2024

S&P 500 Returns With and Without Dividends (Monthly 12.31.1929 – 11.30.2023)



Sources: Ned Davis Research; S&P Dow Jones Indices.

The chart above shows the long-term return of the market with and without dividends. Looking back over time, the return of the S&P 500® Index without dividends is roughly 60% of the return with dividends. Is this observation relevant today? We'd note that while the Russell 1000® Value Index rose in 2023, over the past two years (12.31.2021 – 12.31.2023), the return for the

index without dividends was negative while the index's total return that includes dividends was positive, according to Bloomberg L.P. Over the past two years, it appears that dividends have delivered.

As always, thank you for your interest and trust managing your investments.

Charles J. Wittmann, CFA®, Executive Director, joined Sterling Capital Management in 2014 and has investment experience since 1995. Chip is Co-Portfolio Manager of the Equity Income strategy. Prior to joining Sterling, he worked for Thompson Siegel & Walmsley as a portfolio manager and (generalist) analyst. Prior to TS&W, he was a founding portfolio manager and analyst with Shockoe Capital, an equity long/short hedge fund. Chip received his B.A. in Economics from Davidson College and his M.B.A. from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. Chip earned the Certificate in ESG Investing, which is developed, administered and awarded by the CFA Society of the United Kingdom. He holds the Chartered Financial Analyst® designation.



Important Information

Disclosures

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Dividend-focused strategies may underperform strategies that do not limit their investment to dividend-paying stocks. Stocks held strategy may reduce or stop paying dividends, affecting the strategy's ability to generate income.

The volatility of an index varies greatly. All indices are unmanaged and investments cannot be made directly in an index.

The Russell 1000® Value Index measures the performance of the large-cap value segment of the U.S. equity universe. It includes those Russell 1000® companies with lower price-to-book ratios and lower expected growth values. The Russell 1000® Value Index is constructed to provide a comprehensive and unbiased barometer for the large-cap value segment. The index is completely reconstituted annually to ensure new and growing equities are included and that the represented companies continue to reflect value characteristics.

The S&P 500® Index is a readily available, carefully constructed, market-value-weighted benchmark of common stock performance. Currently, the S&P 500 Composite includes 500 of the largest stocks (in terms of stock market value) in the United States and covers approximately 80% of available market capitalization.

Dividend Policies: Dividend Paying vs. Non-Paying: Each stock's dividend policy is determined by its indicated annual dividend. We classify a stock as a dividend-paying stock if the company indicates that it is going to be paying a dividend within the year. A stock is classified as a non-payer if the stock's indicated annual dividend is zero. Prior to July 2000, the indicated annual dividends were updated on a quarterly basis. Since July 2000, the indicated annual dividends are updated on a daily basis, so the most up-to-date information is used. The index returns are calculated using monthly equal-weighted averages of the total returns of all dividend-paying (or non-paying) stocks. A stock's return is only included during the period it is a component of the underlying index. The dividend figure used to categorize the stock is the company's indicated annual dividend, which may be different from the actual dividends paid in a particular month.

Dividend Growing, No-Change-in-Dividend, and Dividend Cutting: Each dividend-paying stock is further classified into one of the three categories based on changes to their dividend policy over the previous 12 months. Dividend Growers and Initiators include stocks that increased their dividend anytime in the last 12 months. Once an increase occurs, it remains classified as a grower for 12 months or until another change in dividend policy. No-Change stocks are those that maintained their existing indicated annual dividend for the last 12 months (i.e., companies that have a static, non-zero dividend). Dividend Cutters and Eliminators are companies that have lowered or eliminated their dividend anytime in the last 12 months. Once a decrease occurs, it remains classified as a cutter for 12 months or until another change in dividend policy. (Source: Ned Davis Research).

Technical Terms: Dividend Risk: Dividend yield is one component of performance and should not be the only consideration for investment. Dividends are not guaranteed and will fluctuate. This report should not be regarded by the recipients as a substitute for the exercise of their own judgment. It is important to review your investment objectives, risk tolerance and liquidity needs before choosing an investment style or manager. **Dividend Yield:** a financial ratio that measures the annual value of dividends received relative to the market value per share of a security. In other words, the dividend yield formula calculates the percentage of a company's market price of a share that is paid to shareholders in the form of dividends. (Technical definitions are sourced from Corporate Finance Institute and Investopedia.)

The **Chartered Financial Analyst® (CFA)** charter is a graduate-level investment credential awarded by CFA Institute — the largest global association of investment professionals. To earn the CFA charter, candidates must: 1) pass three sequential, six-hour examinations; 2) have at least four years of qualified professional investment experience; 3) join CFA Institute as members; and 4) commit to abide by, and annually reaffirm, their adherence to the CFA Institute Code of Ethics and Standards of Professional Conduct.

Since we began publishing The Lead in 2015, our primary purpose has been to communicate our investment philosophy and process as an investment advisor in the context of changing markets. In creating portfolios that differ from our benchmarks by focusing on characteristics that have a long term history of attractive relative returns according to Ned Davis Research, the portfolios are different from the benchmarks and as a result there can be periods where results differ including below benchmark performance. Since strategies are oriented toward the long term characteristics, if those characteristics are out of favor over a period of time, the given strategy's performance could be challenged in terms of relative performance. While Sterling believes active professional investment management that employs a consistent process with a long term orientation and aligned with client interests offers benefits, management fees to support the active approach can be higher than certain alternatives. When hiring an investment manager we believe it is important to monitor the investment risks taken including sector concentrations, portfolio turnover, and the impacts of dividend policy changes.