



OCTOBER 2025

# Notes From the Road

## Autumn '25

We reflect on the most common questions that have come up in our recent meetings with clients around the world. After such a significant run in risk assets, we are often asked if this, tactically, augurs a painful reversal. While we do think there is complacency about volatility, neither “fundamentals” nor sentiment are signaling excess. We remain positive on equities over the next 12 months.

Nearly every meeting saw clients asking us about the US dollar and gold. The consensus is that the dollar will depreciate; the more interesting conversation is on its correlation with risk assets. We think that non-dollar investors should increase dollar hedging. Everyone wanted to talk about gold, but its actual ownership is much more sporadic by investor type. We retain our view that gold is an important asset to hold from a strategic point of view.

US exceptionalism remains a key topic. Our view is still that an overweight US equity position is justified; the calls to overweight Europe that we heard earlier in the year are now more muted.

There were also many conversations about AI. The key macro issue is: What level of productivity growth is possible, and can it offset downward forces on growth? Clients we met assume that AI will be devastating for labor demand.

A very different topic came up a number of times—the role of a Total Portfolio Approach. We have long been advocates of it. We think it is a rational response to a different set of macro opportunities in return and diversification.

**Inigo Fraser Jenkins**

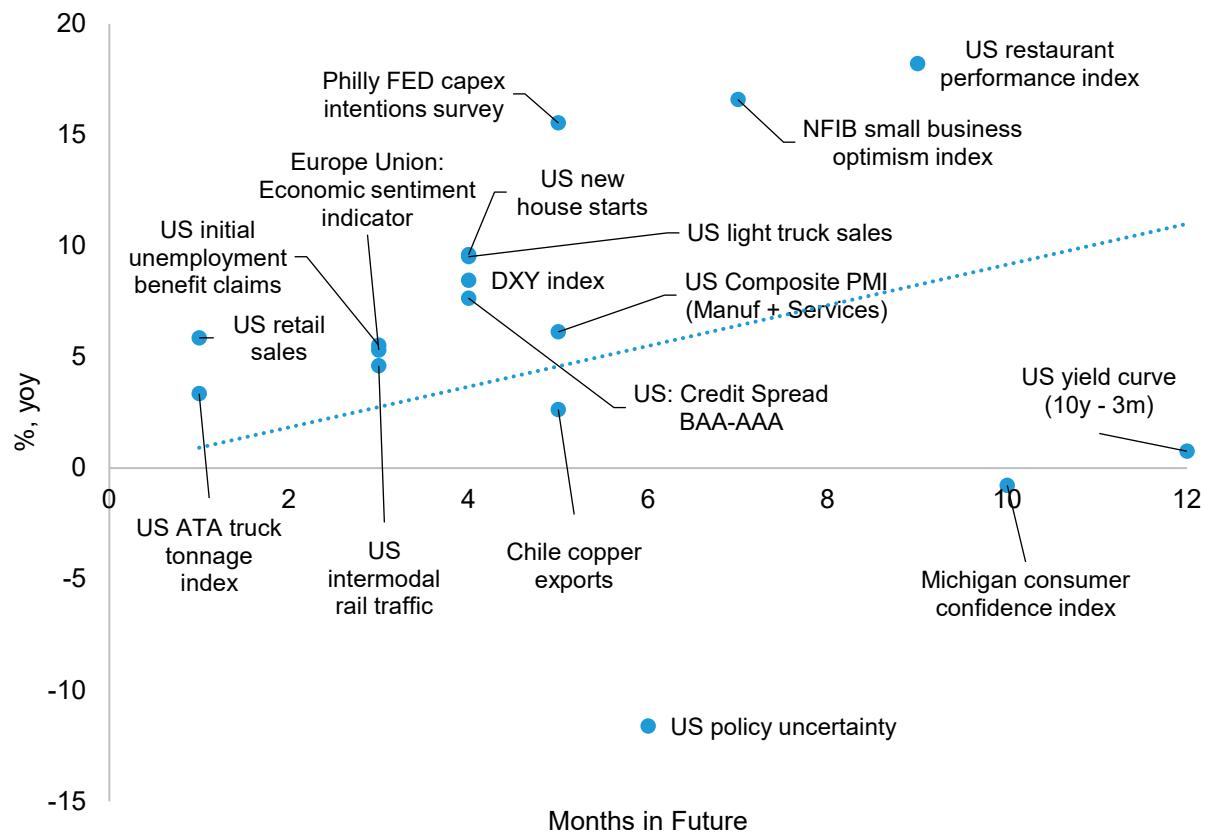
**Additional Contributors:** Alla Harmsworth, Robertas Stancikas, and Maureen Hughes

## After the rally, is there something horrible around the corner?

A common feature in recent meetings is clients expressing anxiety about markets going up too far, too fast. Is this, to use the common phrase, a case of markets being “priced for perfection”? After all, the S&P 500 is up 8% since August 1, investment-grade credit 2% over the same time, and emerging markets (EM) are outperforming. But at the same time, gold is up 17% and silver up 30%. An odd juxtaposition! Despite this rally, it is hard to articulate a case that investors have let sentiment run out of control, or that this rally is necessarily disconnected from fundamentals. With a caveat about volatility, which we outline below, we are happy to remain positive on risk assets for the next 12 months.

Contrasting indicators have emerged on the cyclical outlook. Our indicator for US earnings (*Display 1*), which tracks diverse micro and macro economic data points, has been steadily improving in recent months from the low point of April. It currently projects a robust US earnings outlook of 11% growth over the next 12 months. The key areas of improvement in recent months have been the restaurant-performance index, tracking consumers, the composite Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) indicator and capital expenditure (capex) expectations.

**DISPLAY 1: OUR PROPRIETARY EARNINGS INDICATOR PROJECTS 11% GROWTH OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS**



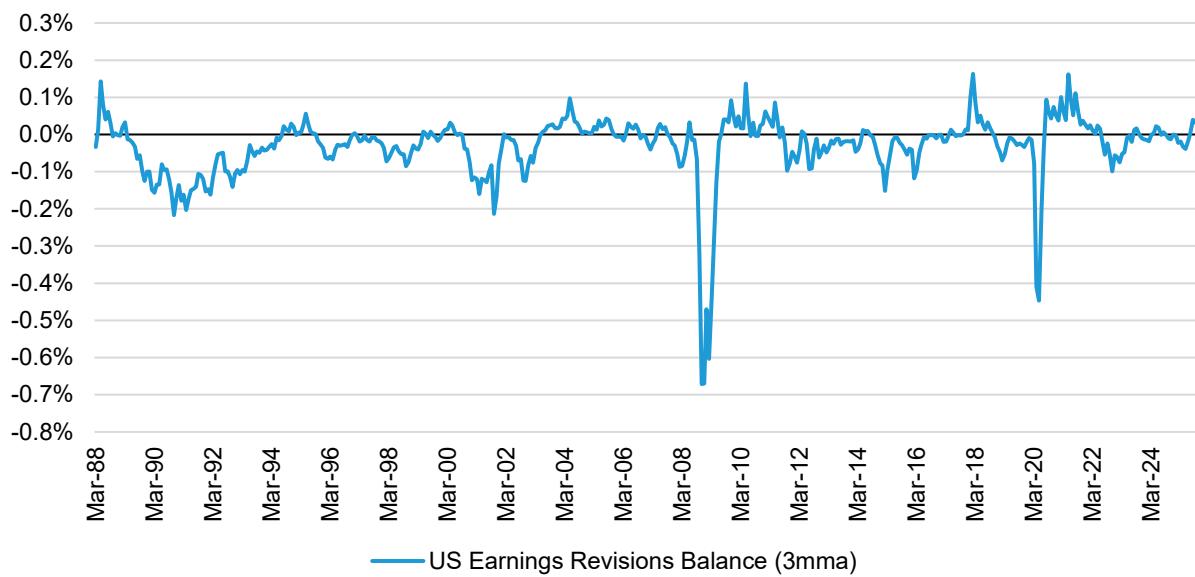
**Current analysis does not guarantee future results.**

As of September 15, 2025

Source: FRED, LSEG Data & Analytics, Macrobond and AllianceBernstein (AB)

As a result of these trends, the consensus earnings-revisions balance has also turned decisively positive in recent months (*Display 2*), suggesting growing confidence in the near-term earnings outlook.

## DISPLAY 2: US CONSENSUS EARNINGS REVISIONS HAVE TURNED DECISIVELY POSITIVE



**Current analysis does not guarantee future results.**

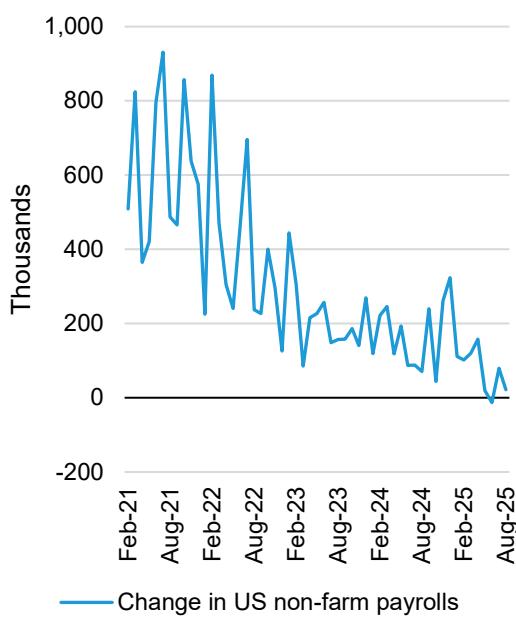
As of September 30, 2025

Source: Factset and AB

However, the optimistic earnings outlook is in tension with continued signs of weakness in the US labor market. *Display 3* shows that the US economy added only 22,000 jobs in August, which is considerably below the run rate of recent years. Sectors most impacted by tariffs, such as manufacturing, have been shedding jobs in every month since April. Federal government employment is another source of notable weakness in recent months and is likely to accelerate in the near term, as workers who accepted buyout or early-retirement offers in many cases were still employed through the summer. Other indicators, such as the JOLTS survey or the average length of unemployment, have also been persistently negative in recent months.

Also, as *Display 4* shows, while US economic-policy uncertainty has declined from its peak in April this year, it is still significantly above the historical average. This situation should act as a drag on future consumer confidence, business sentiment and future hiring intentions. The time of writing sees the beginning of a US government shutdown; past instances have tended not to have huge long-lasting consequences. However, the shutdown at the very least creates more near-term uncertainty, not least for labor markets, given threats to fire government workers.

### DISPLAY 3: US JOB MARKET IS WEAKENING

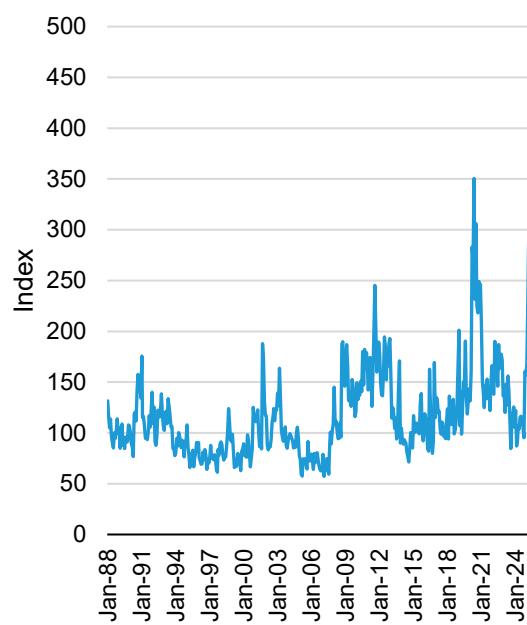


#### Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

As of August 15, 2025

Source: LSEG Data & Analytics and AB

### DISPLAY 4: US ECONOMIC POLICY UNCERTAINTY IS STILL ELEVATED



#### Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

As of August 15, 2025

Source: [www.policyuncertainty.com](http://www.policyuncertainty.com) and AB

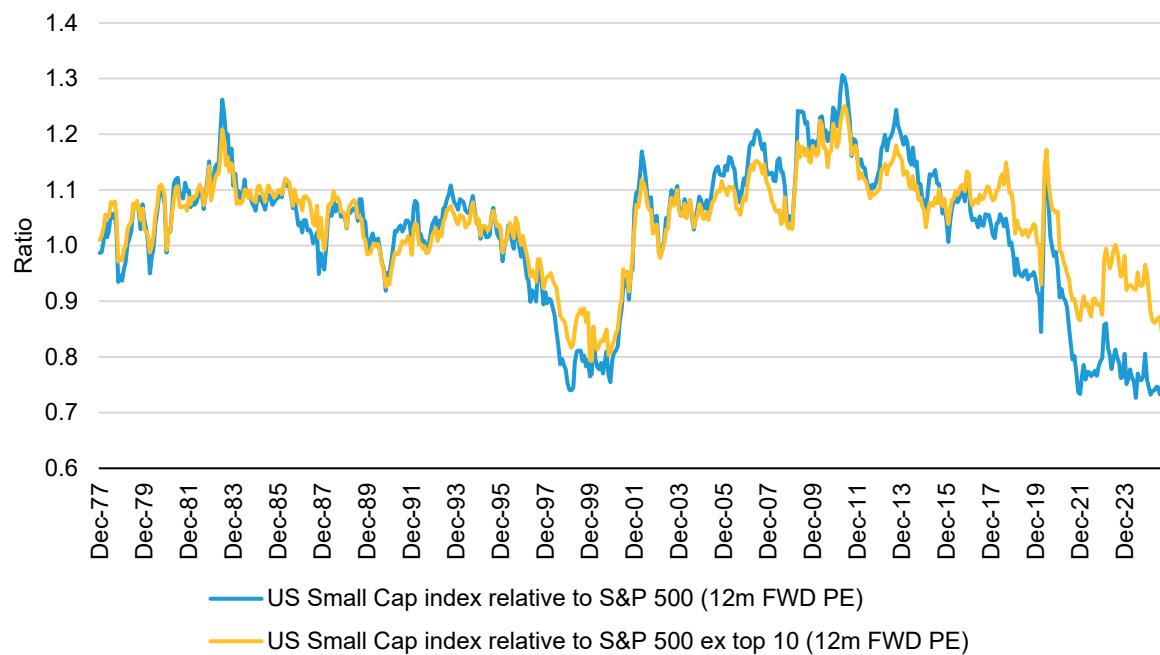
### Small cap valuations attracting attention

The outlook for small cap stocks also came up in a number of conversations. The nearly 30% discount of US small caps to the broader S&P 500 Index (*Display 5*) is starting to attract people's attention. The discount is significant even after adjusting for the elevated valuation of the top 10 companies in the S&P 500. In recent client meetings, there has also been nearly universal agreement that small caps are a fertile area for active management and can be a durable source of alpha in portfolios.

However, a few clients noted that in recent years, even with the benefit of alpha, the absolute return of small caps has significantly lagged the S&P 500; they wondered whether small caps could outperform in relative terms in the future. There is a strategic case that, in a world of low asset-class "beta" returns, "alpha" needs to play a larger role in allocations, thus exposure to smaller-cap areas of the market can help with this.

We also noted that small caps are relatively more exposed to tariffs: they have less ability to adjust their supply chains to find alternative suppliers in the short term and less pricing power to pass on extra costs to consumers. Small caps traditionally are more cyclical than the broader market; arguably, that should hold true now more than ever, given the potential structural growth exposure of mega caps. This then goes to the heart of the conundrum of the upward vs. downward forces on near-term growth.

#### DISPLAY 5: SMALL CAP RELATIVE VALUATION IS APPROACHING HISTORIC LOWS



#### Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

Note: The small cap index includes the next 1,000 largest stocks after the S&P 500 and the next 500 largest stocks in the US.

As of September 26, 2025

Source: Factset and AB

#### Volatility complacency?

While declining uncertainty around tariffs and surprisingly resilient US economic data in the last two quarters have understandably boosted equity markets and suppressed both equity and bond volatility, two persistent structural challenges—valuation and market concentration—have become worse. The US Shiller price/earnings (PE) multiple currently stands at 38x and is firmly in the top decile of historical valuations. Market concentration continues to grow more extreme, with the top 10 largest stocks in the US market now accounting for 38% of the total capitalization. We can show that both valuation and market concentration are both independently significant in predicting future drawdowns and higher volatility (Display 6).

So, if the current valuation and concentration imply higher volatility (though not a lower market level in 12 months), then this observation sits uncomfortably with the current levels of the VIX and the bond volatility MOVE index. Both suggest that the current benign volatility environment will continue.

*The practical implication of this is that it makes a positive case for exposure to low-volatility strategies, in the context of investors still wanting positive equity-market beta exposure. This case for low volatility is further supported by attractive valuations on these strategies compared with the long-run history of low-volatility valuation.*

## DISPLAY 6: HIGH VALUATION AND CONCENTRATION RAISE THE RISK OF FUTURE DRAWDOWNS

<b>Two-Year Forward S&amp;P 500 Drawdown</b>	
<b>Variable</b>	<b>T-stat</b>
Starting Weight of US Top-10 Stocks	-5.76
Starting Shiller PE Ratio	-9.57
Adjusted R-Squared	14%

<b>Five-Year Forward S&amp;P 500 Drawdown</b>	
<b>Variable</b>	<b>T-stat</b>
Starting Weight of US Top-10 Stocks	-5.99
Starting Shiller PE Ratio	-12.83
Adjusted R-Squared	22%

### Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

Note: The tables show the regression of S&P 500 drawdowns over two-year and five-year forward horizons based on the starting valuation and the weight of top 10 stocks in the US market. The regression covers the period from June 1969 to August 2024.

Source: Factset, Robert Shiller's data library and AB

## The dollar, gold, stablecoins and crypto

Nearly every meeting with investors in the last three months has featured conversations about the role of the dollar. These conversations have also often strayed onto the topic of gold and other possibly related assets. The consensus that we have heard in meetings is that the dollar is set to further weaken. As this has become a more common view this year, it is perhaps less interesting. However, there is a more nuanced debate about how much to hedge dollar-denominated assets and how the correlation on the dollar and risk assets has changed. We think that non-dollar investors should increase the hedging of their US dollar positions, though the scale varies by their base currency.<sup>1</sup>

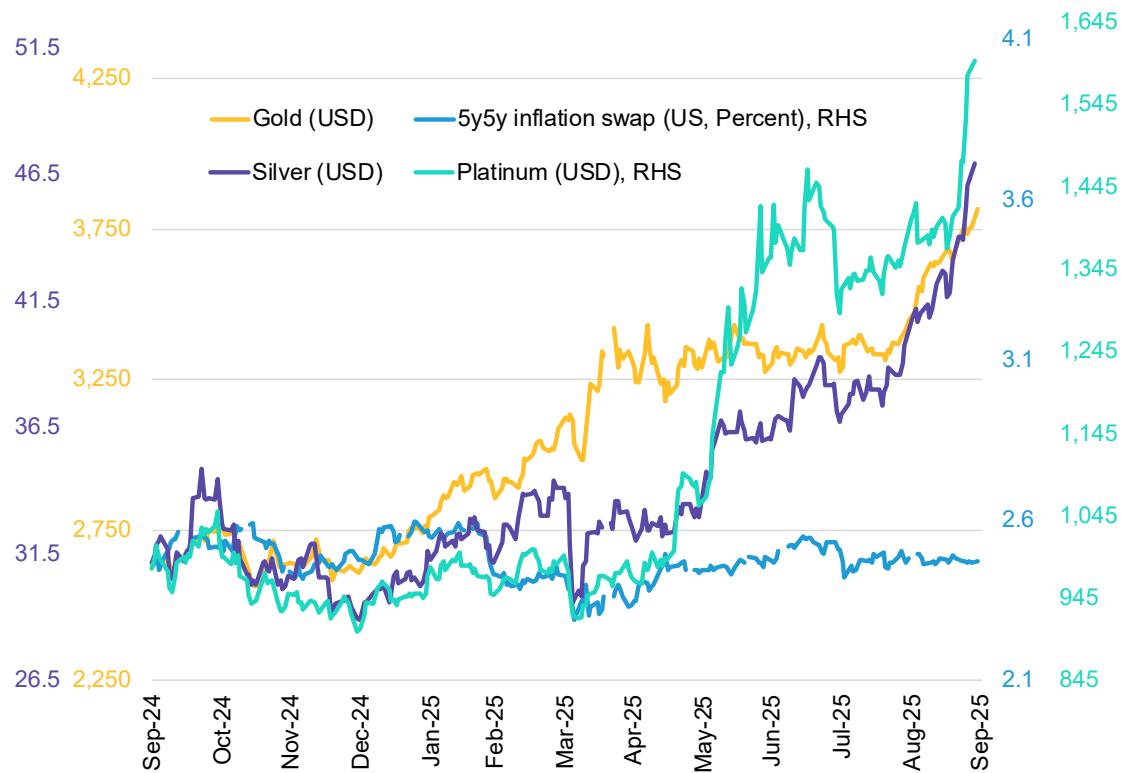
The investors that we have spoken with seemed surprised that there were no outflows from US assets this year, despite all the public disquiet about them. For example, Japanese pension plans that were the subject of much discussion with regard to US bonds, given their very significant holding, appear to have bought back the long-duration bond positions sold for a brief period in April, and have gone on to buy more than that.

We take the view that the role of the dollar will be challenged by the separate forces of fiscal sustainability and geopolitics. However, any move away from the dollar will be slow given the lack of alternatives. This is one element of the strategic case for gold. The other element, which is really paramount for investors, is that the correlation of gold with equities remains zero at higher levels of inflation. Thus, there is a diversification case for gold that will remain in place.

One of the odd aspects of the huge rally in gold, up 45% this year, and the belated rallies in silver and platinum as catch-up trades, is that they come against the backdrop of no meaningful change at all in market-based inflation expectations (Display 7). This could suggest that the strategic worries about inflation reflected in non-fiat assets are actually distinct from market instruments that may be swayed by shorter-term views on inflation that are more quiescent. Or perhaps the non-fiat assets are pricing a reduction of central bank independence and higher inflation via the loss of reserve-currency status. This process could be beyond the scope of how instruments like inflation breakeven rates and 5-year/5-year swaps operate (the disconnect still exists if one views the precious-metal returns from the viewpoint of another major fiat currency, such as the euro).

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.alliancebernstein.com/americas/en/institutions/insights/investment-insights/the-dollar-half-awake-in-a-fake-empire.html>

**DISPLAY 7: GOLD, SILVER AND PLATINUM HAVE RALLIED WHILE INFLATION EXPECTATIONS HAVEN'T MOVED**



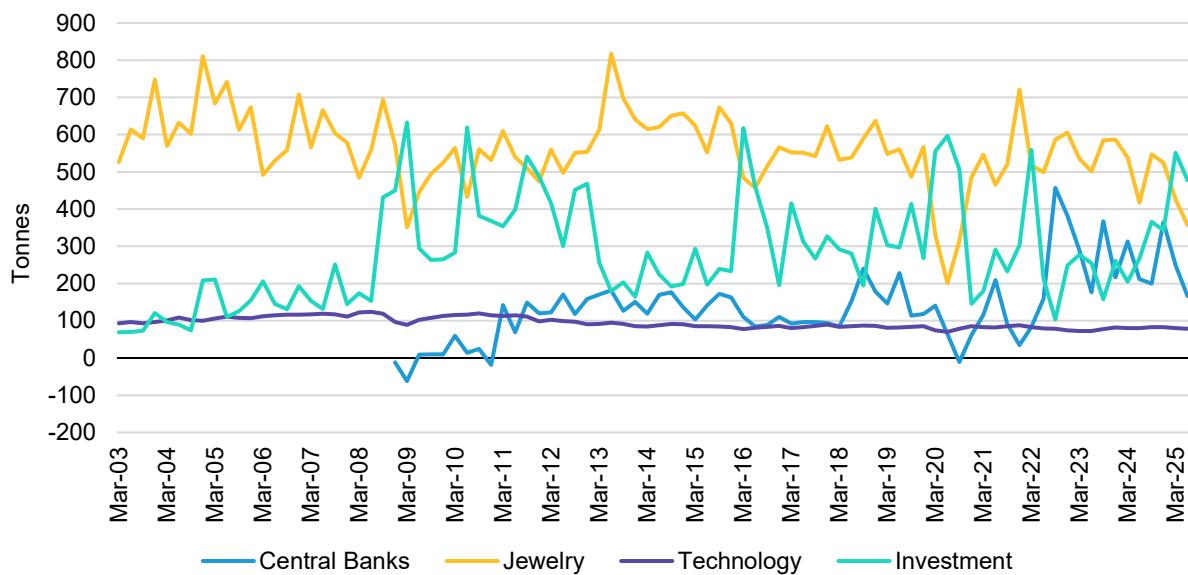
**Current analysis does not guarantee future results.**

As of September 29, 2025

Source: Bloomberg and AB

The strategic case for gold still stands, we think. After such an abrupt move higher, and in the absence of an adequate metric for valuation of the asset, the tactical case is more difficult. For us, the allocation has to be strategic. The note of caution on tactical positioning in gold is encapsulated in the observation that investor demand has increased rapidly and that, based on the latest available data, is the dominant source of gold demand, overtaking even jewelry demand—which is usually considerably greater. Investor demand is probably more fickle than other gold demand, so this current state likely increases gold's near-term volatility. Our impression from client conversations in recent months is that, while nearly every macro meeting involves at least some discussion of gold, the willingness to own it is still very dependent on investor type. Pension funds, for example, find it hard to make a case to own it. Thus, there is still a strategic case for institutions to buy more, if they adopt a view of higher equilibrium inflation.

#### DISPLAY 8: UNUSUALLY, INVESTMENT IS DOMINATING GOLD DEMAND



Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

As of June 30, 2025

Source: World Gold Council and AB

In *Display 9*, we show the four most-recent instances when gold investment demand exceeded demand for gold as jewelry, and then consider the one-year and two-year forward returns for gold in both absolute terms and relative to a US 60/40 stock and bond portfolio. From prior instances, the absolute returns for gold are mostly positive, but it tended to underperform a 60/40 portfolio except for in 2022. That track record might be taken as a warning signal, except that on closer inspection, in those prior periods, growth expectations were damaged and market valuations were a lot lower. So, we do not think this is as severe a prognosis this time, given we are in a world where essentially all asset classes are expensive. Yet another near-term support for gold comes from central banks having a net easing bias.

#### DISPLAY 9: GOLD'S ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE PERFORMANCE IN PERIODS WHEN INVESTOR DEMAND FOR GOLD EXCEEDED DEMAND FOR JEWELRY

Start Date	Gold Absolute Return		Gold vs. US 60/40	
	12M FWD	24M FWD	12M FWD	24M FWD
September 30, 2011	9.63	-18.12	-10.77	-49.19
March 31, 2016	0.63	7.02	-8.16	-10.30
March 31, 2020	5.10	20.71	-22.04	-16.75
March 31, 2022	1.93	14.02	9.03	6.15

Current analysis does not guarantee future results.

As of September 29, 2025

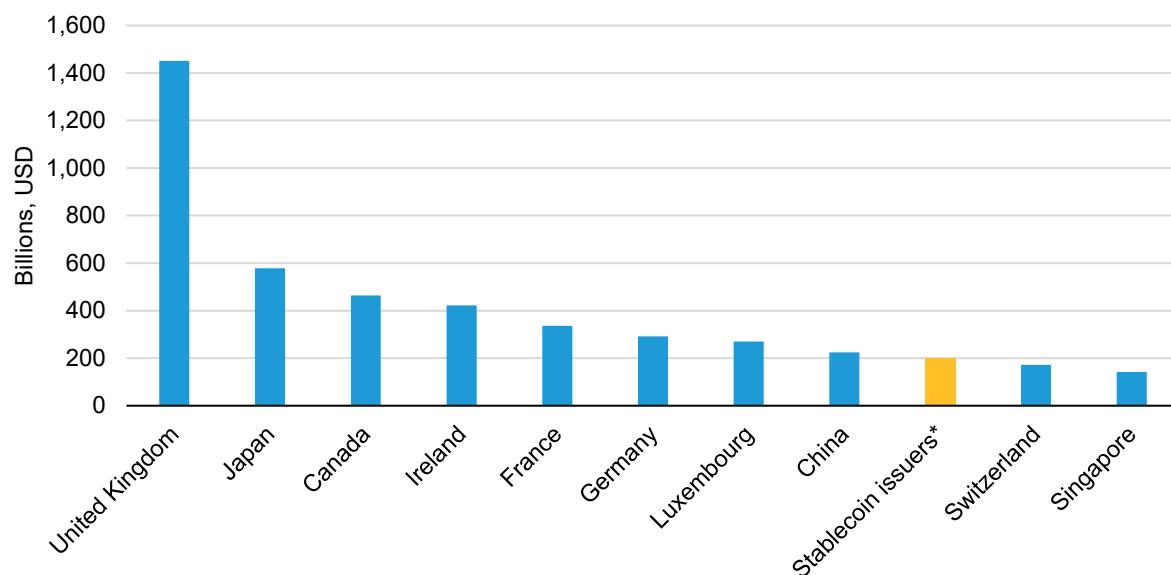
Source: LSEG Data & Analytics, World Gold Council and AB

Other related questions in client meetings are around crypto and stablecoins. On crypto, the level of institutional holding is still *de minimus*. The views of investors are also more diverse on crypto than on any other asset. We do find plenty of pushback on our case to own it in portfolios. The main points of contention are that: 1) it has zero intrinsic value; 2) its threat to monetary sovereignty means that states will try to ban it, and 3) its correlation with other assets is not stable. All of these are legitimate worries. Our view remains that the macro setup creates an investor case for non-fiat assets. This is primarily an argument for gold, but also can be extended to other assets that could share similar characteristics.

Stablecoins are a newer topic in client meetings. We think they could be an important new source of US dollar demand in the future. The GENIUS (Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for U.S. Stablecoins) Act, signed into law in July this year, established much-needed regulatory clarity around stablecoins and other crypto assets. It also requires stablecoin issuers to be fully backed by reserves that may only be invested in liquid and low-risk US assets, such as T-bills, insured bank deposits and repo agreements backed by Treasuries. The composition of reserves must be transparent, and monthly public disclosures certified by independent audit firms are required.

Stablecoins extend US dollar use into crypto trading markets, decentralized finance and tokenized assets—areas that we expect to grow in the future, further reinforcing the US dollar's network effects. They also strengthen the US dollar's role in cross-border payments by reducing transaction costs and making them faster. Stablecoins also enable access to US dollars in emerging markets, where high inflation rates and volatile local currencies force locals to look for more stable alternatives for savings and payments. In many cases, individuals in these countries might not even have access to a bank account, but do have access to a mobile phone that can be used to purchase and transfer stablecoins. In fact, stablecoin issuers are already among the top holders of US short-term debt instruments (*Display 10*). The debt-maturity profile of the US was shortening anyway, but the emergence of stablecoins as a source of demand for short-term debt could encourage this all the more.

**DISPLAY 10: STABLECOIN ISSUERS ARE ALREADY A TOP-10 HOLDER OF US SHORT-TERM ASSETS**



**Current analysis does not guarantee future results.**

Stablecoin issuer data is as of March 2025

As of July 31, 2025

Source: Bank of International Settlements, US Treasury and AB

The rapid growth of stablecoins might not have an impact in the short term, but we view it as building up problems further ahead. While stablecoins enable faster and more efficient purchasing of dollars, they also enable faster withdrawals that can exacerbate volatility in times of crisis. A recent study by the Bank of International Settlements<sup>2</sup> (BIS) examined US-dollar-backed stablecoin flows from 2021 to 2025, finding evidence that flows in and out of stablecoins already have a meaningful impact on US Treasury yields over a daily horizon. And the impact of flows was asymmetric: stablecoin outflows raised short-term yields by two to three times as much as inflows lowered them. If stablecoins emerge as a catalyst to further shorten the maturity of debt issuance, then that also plays into the narrative of helping in the short term but storing up problems over the longer term.

<sup>2</sup> Please see: BIS Working Papers No 1270, Stablecoins and safe asset prices; Rashad Ahmed and Iñaki Aldasoro, Monetary and Economic Department, May 2025.

## AI, productivity and labor

AI has, obviously, been a discussion in all meetings in recent months. Coming at this topic from a macro perspective, the aspects of AI that are most pertinent give rise to these questions: What can the aggregate productivity improvement of AI be? Can the level of capex be justified? If AI does raise productivity, is that necessarily devastating for labor?

Our first response is to point out that the ability to forecast productivity has been highly problematic, to say the least. Economists have struggled to forecast productivity growth, or the lack of it, in recent decades. The inability to adequately explain the lack of productivity growth during the age of the internet should be a warning signal for plugging in an AI-leg growth assumption as the base case for a narrative. From our meetings, it is apparent that it is too early for investors to have formed a consensus about what the growth boost from AI will be. To the extent that investors are building a view of this into their models, they seem demure about it. We have, however, heard more pushback on the low-balled estimate from Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu that productivity gains from AI will be of the order of only one percentage point, and spread out over a decade.<sup>3</sup> More-recent estimates have skewed higher than this. One investor did quip in a recent meeting that all the forecasts for AI are interestingly positive, i.e., they don't include the negative impact on AI from potentially greater wealth inequality, uncertainty around political elections and possibly greater geopolitical uncertainty.

Our recent research on this<sup>4</sup> topic tries to reverse engineer the problem. Rather than trying to forecast the productivity gain of AI, can we forecast the downward forces on growth from other contemporaneous macro forces to see if it's plausible that AI can offset them? In a US context, our mid case for the decline in growth expectations from the confluence of a lower growth rate in the working-age population and a temperature increase of more than two degrees Celsius is a one percentage point per annum reduction in growth rates over the next decade.

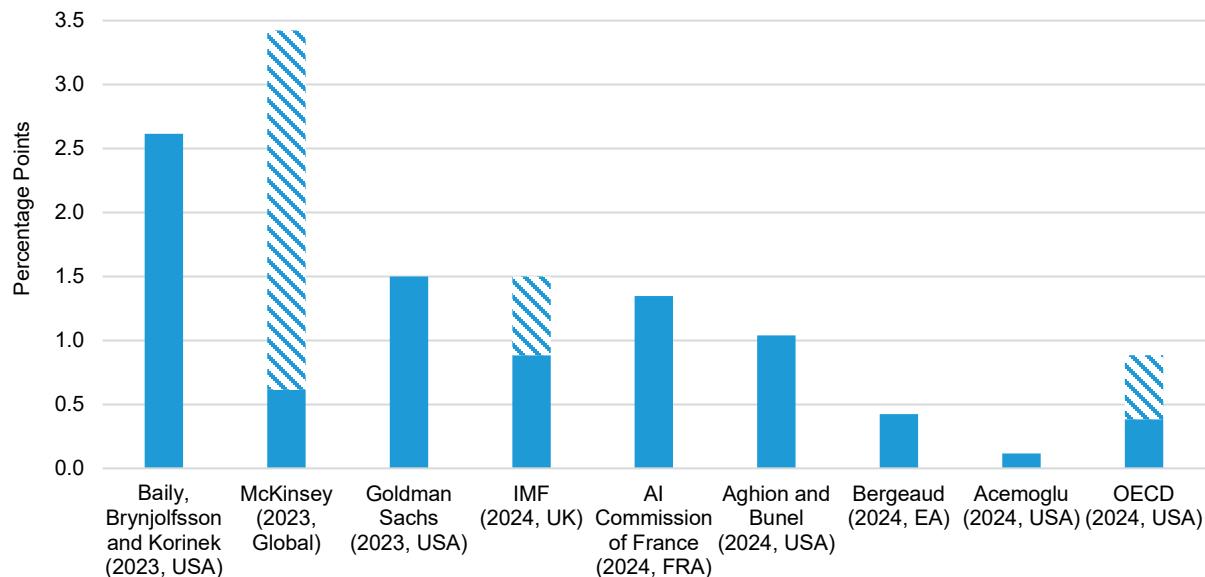
A cottage industry has emerged in the last 18 months of trying to forecast what productivity growth is possible. An average of nine of the most prominent studies (*Display 11*) suggests 0.9 percentage points per annum growth in productivity, with a very large range around it. To put this in context, it is similar in magnitude to the sustained increase in UK growth rates after the widespread adoption of the steam engine in the 1820s. So, such an increase is doable, though a sustained increase on a greater scale than this would be unprecedented. The bottom line is that AI might plausibly offset some or even a significant part of the downward forces on growth in the US, though to claim that it leads to a net increase in growth rates compared with the last 40 years is a tall order.

Outside the US, this result is even harder to achieve, given greater demographic pressures in other developed markets and China as well as the likelihood that gains from AI in non-US developed markets will likely be lower than in the US.

<sup>3</sup> <https://economics.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/The%20Simple%20Macroeconomics%20of%20AI.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.alliancebernstein.com/americas/en/institutions/insights/investment-insights/ai-vs-demographics-or-might-shrinking-populations-not-be-so-bad-if-robots-are-taking-jobs-anyway.html>

**DISPLAY 11: DIVERGENT VIEWS ABOUT THE AGGREGATE PRODUCTIVITY GAINS FROM AI**  
 PREDICTED INCREASE IN ANNUAL LABOR PRODUCTIVITY GROWTH OVER A 10-YEAR HORIZON DUE TO AI



**Current analysis does not guarantee future results.**

When the source presents a range of estimates as the main result, the lower and upper bounds are indicated by striped areas. In cases where predictions are made for total factor productivity, predicted labor productivity gains are obtained by assuming a standard long-run multiplier of 1.5 regarding the adjustment of the capital stock (Acemoglu 2024, Aghion and Bunel 2024, Bergeaud 2024 and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). The estimates refer to the countries shown in parentheses.

As of December 8, 2024

Source: <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/miracle-or-myth-assessing-macroeconomic-productivity-gains-artificial-intelligence> and AB

Productivity gains from AI can come from several potential sources: displacing labor, making a unit of labor more productive, and, in time, creating new productive roles that do not currently exist. Many of the academic approaches to estimating the aggregate productivity improvement of AI are coy about how much comes from each of these sources. Among the investors we have met in recent months that are willing to share their views on the topic, there is more of a consensus on this point than on the aggregate growth impact. The majority of investors we have met assume that a productivity gain from AI will be primarily from labor displacement, and hence have a pessimistic view of the demand for labor. Some cited the recent Brynjolfsson et. al paper, showing a sharp increase in the unemployment rate for the younger cohort of workers in sectors such as information technology, as evidence that this was already talking place.<sup>5</sup> The counterargument is that 200 years of automation have not led to a trend increase in structural unemployment. However, there is a strong case to be made that the sectors most exposed to AI are the least unionized, which at least suggests that the balance of labor vs. capital bargaining power will likely shift in favor of capital even more so than with recent rounds of automation.

<sup>5</sup> Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B., & Chen, R. (2025). *Canaries in the coal mine? Six facts about the recent employment effects of artificial intelligence*.

## Revisiting the case for US exceptionalism

Another topic that came up in almost all conversations is whether there is still a case to be made for US exceptionalism. We continue to believe there is a strong case to be made for defending US exceptionalism, and we continue to overweight US equities, a position that we laid out in detail in our research report in May.<sup>6</sup>

A clear change has taken place in interactions with investors; the clamor to overweight non-US markets that was heard in April is now notably more muted. The difficulty with the pro-US strategic view is valuation, but we would point out that valuation has not been a driver of longer-term relative regional performance for 30 years...why should that start now?

In our view, exceptionalism is a strategic concept, not a tactical one, and the US has advantages on this front, including:

- **More favorable demographics.** The US working-age population is still projected to grow over the next decade, while it is shrinking rapidly in Europe, China and a number of other developed countries. Even a harsh zero-immigration scenario with a slight decline in the US working-age population as a result would still see a less unfavorable demographic prognosis than in Europe, Japan and China.
- **Strong effect from technology.** Whatever the gain in productivity is, there is a good case for the effect to be stronger in the US (whether that is from more agile use of technology and data to make workers more productive or through greater ease in firing workers whose jobs are displaced).
- Energy security and geographic security of supply chains
- Scale of the home market and a relatively low dependence on imports
- Structurally higher and more persistent corporate profitability
- Low tax rates and corporate-friendly policies

As noted above, the view that the US is exceptional from an equity perspective is distinct from a more subdued view on the dollar's prospects.

## The Total Portfolio Approach

A very different topic has also come up in client meetings, one that is methodological rather than a view on the market. This is the question of whether a Total Portfolio Approach (TPA) offers a better outlook today, and whether it is something that asset owners need to adopt.

We have been asked about this in the Middle East, in Northern Europe and in Canada, and there have been high-profile cases of pension funds in different regions adopting such an approach.<sup>7</sup> A TPA can be defined in several ways, but at its heart the idea is that one considers a portfolio holistically, especially in terms of risk exposures, as opposed to delineating the portfolio primarily in terms of asset classes. All investment approaches require constraints, but under TPA those constraints do not need to be anchored on asset-class silos. The idea is not new; we have been proponents of it in our research for at least a decade. The topic has come and gone in terms of client interest, though. In recent years, interest fell, likely reflecting that returns from relatively simple allocation across asset classes have served investors well, especially in a period that was mainly dominated by quiescent inflation and negative stock-bond correlations.

The topic deserves a note in its own right, which we will include in our research pipeline. However, it is interesting that there has been a tangible uptick in interest in different regions. We think there is a good reason for this. In part, it is a natural consequence of the structural shift in portfolios that requires a greater allocation to private and alternative assets with an ever-growing number of sub asset classes within them, and no preset rules to determine how to allocate across such assets. An equally large driver is the macro prognosis. If one assumes that the future promises a 15% per annum return on equities, quiescent inflation

<sup>6</sup> Please see: <https://www.alliancebernstein.com/americas/en/institutions/insights/investment-insights/the-end-of-us-exceptionalism.html>

<sup>7</sup> For a recent example see *NYC Pensions Rethink Portfolio Mgmt Approach*, Fundfire September 30, 2025

and a return to negative stock-bond correlations, then switching the governance structure of a fund to a TPA model is probably not worth it. However, we think it is likely that none of these elements hold anymore, and allocators who have a similar view will have an incentive to do something different.

It is the required switch in governance that is the hardest part to achieve, and with it there is an implied change in organizational structure. This is a high bar for institutions to overcome, so adoption will likely be slow for this reason. However, we fully expect announcements of more funds making such a switch.

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