

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

Summary

U.S. manufacturing and exports have been a headwind for the economy throughout 2019. This is partially due to the ongoing trade war with China and the uncertainty related to when, and how, the skirmish is settled. However, as the signing of a “Phase 1” deal seems more likely than ever, another variable has emerged as a speed bump on the road to a goods produced recovery – Boeing’s 737 Max airplane. Projected production halts in Q1 2020 will exacerbate the deleterious impact of weaker exports, capital expenditures and inventory growth on GDP totals.

Manufacturing activity levels were already soft in the second half of 2019 in part due to the longest autoworkers strike in 50 years. Boeing’s travails will seemingly extend the weak trend in this small but very important part of the U.S. economy. While most forecasts are projecting Boeing’s production issues to decrease nominal GDP in the first quarter by an average estimate of 0.5%, the situation warrants monitoring as it could continue to weigh on the economy. If the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) recertification takes longer than expected, it’s not hard to envision the ripple effects throughout Boeing’s supply chain that could lead other companies to reduce headcount.

On the other side of the ledger, U.S. housing may be a key cushion going forward to soften the weakness in manufacturing. Interest rate cuts by the Fed and a large drop in mortgage finance rates are brightening the outlook for single family and commercial construction activity. New home construction has only retraced about half the deficit from the 2006 peak, while Real Private Nonresidential Fixed Investment is near a cycle low. Higher degrees of economic certainty and a Fed on pause, should help these two sectors next year in offsetting some of the weakness from Boeing’s Q1 production shortfalls.

Positives

Personal spending was solid during Q4 with robust holiday sales anchoring results

Housing starts and building permits were strong last month, exceeding market expectations

Advanced goods trade balance shrank \$5 billion last month which will boost Q4 GDP

Negatives

Durable goods orders were down 2.0% last month, +1.5% was expected

Most regional manufacturing surveys continue to point to negative or flat growth

Leading economic indicators were flat last month and revised lower (-0.1% to -0.2%)

EQUITY OUTLOOK

Summary

December closed out 2019 in the exact way the year started...in rally mode. The S&P 500 added another 3.0% during the month, bringing that index's return for the year to 31.5%. Domestic mid-cap and small-cap stocks participated in the gains but trailed their large-cap peers for the year. The small-cap Russell 2000 Index gained 25.5% and the Russell Mid-Cap Index rose 30.5%.

All economic sectors within the S&P finished the year solidly in the black, though there was a wide difference in returns. Information technology and communication services were certainly the top performers adding 50.3% and 32.7% respectively. Energy's 11.8% gain and health care's 20.8% gain, while absolutely impressive, were the weakest relative performers in 2019.

International equities had a notable December with the developed MSCI EAFE Index rising 3.3% and the MSCI Emerging Markets Index surging 7.5%. Those indexes still trailed large cap domestic indexes for the year rising 22.0% and 18.4% respectively.

Setting the stage for 2020, the economy continues to grow at a modest pace and the US consumer remains in an extremely healthy position. US-China trade tensions appear to be cooling and any additional progress should serve as a catalyst for equity markets. Corporations continue to buy back shares at an extraordinary pace, which helped push market indexes to new highs. Fixed rates remain historically depressed enticing investors to favor equities as an asset class.

Many of the positive factors that resulted in impressive equity market returns in 2019 still exist at the start of 2020. We believe these conditions will continue to present a solid backdrop for equity investors into the foreseeable future. Politics in Washington will continue to create noise and daily ripples throughout capital markets but all in all we believe corporate America and the broad market have largely learned to deal with those pressures. Stretched stock valuations could put a cap on potential gains in 2020 but steady growth in earnings and fundamentals can alleviate valuation concerns.

Positives

Resilient U.S. consumer and labor markets

TINA – There Is No Alternative (to equities)

No more Fed surprises...we hope

Negatives

Equity valuations are somewhat stretched

Middle East tensions

Unknowns

Signs of trade progress but a very long way to go

FIXED INCOME OUTLOOK

Summary

In many ways, late 2019 looked like a mirror image of late 2018. During the final quarter of 2018, the U.S. was in an escalating trade war with China, the Fed was raising interest rates, and the stock market was plunging. In the past few months, trade tensions have eased with at least the first portion of a trade agreement with China, the Fed has cut rates three times since July and the stock market has been regularly making record highs. With no further Fed action expected in the near term, and short rates well-anchored, this newfound optimism has allowed the curve to steepen with the 10-year Treasury note now yielding about 35 basis points (bps) more than the 2-year Treasury note. This has been the most slope this portion of the yield curve has experienced since June of 2018.

The 2-year note ended 4 bps lower in the month of December at 1.57% while the 10-year note increased by 14 bps to end at 1.92%. The 30-year “long bond” ended the month more than 18 bps higher at 2.39%. With short rates falling and longer rates rising, Treasury bonds in aggregate delivered a negative return with intermediate maturity notes almost flat and bonds with maturities of 10-years or more losing value. With the perception of economic and event risk subsiding, credit spreads narrowed again in December.

The contraction in credit spreads, along with the higher starting yields, allowed investment-grade corporate bonds to buck the trend and deliver positive returns across the maturity spectrum. Blending the two sectors created nearly flat returns for the month, but December still capped the best annual return for the Bloomberg Barclays Intermediate Government/Credit Index in over a decade.

The sharp move lower in the yield curve and the significant contraction in credit spreads will be basically impossible to repeat in 2020. Still, we believe there is little reason to expect that interest rates will move significantly higher from these levels. The Fed has stated they are likely on hold for an extended period and that the only potential change would be a rate cut during a period of economic weakness or uncertainty. A rate hike appears out of the realm of possibilities for the next couple of years. Therefore, we believe that the 2-year note should be slightly below the lower bound of the Fed’s overnight policy range of 1.50% to 1.75% to price in this possibility. Longer rates such as the 10-year could stretch a bit higher, but much of a move will attract both domestic and foreign funds which will cap the upside. Bonds are back in their appropriate role of providing some income and a lot of ballast to one’s portfolio.

Positives

Asymmetric policy where the Fed will only lower rates in the next few years

Inflationary pressures likely to remain muted

Negatives

Yields climbing around the world with less negative yielding debt

Modest growth has returned to some parts of Europe

Unknowns

Tariffs and trade negotiations with China

Trump impeachment proceedings
