

Volatility Test: Defensive Factor Indices versus Actively Managed Funds

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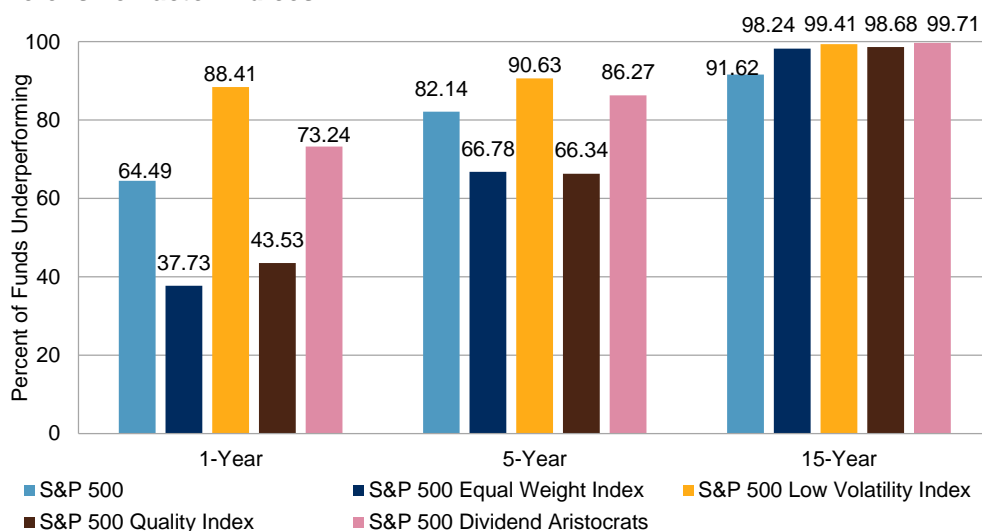
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Indices based on factors such as low volatility and quality generally feature defensive characteristics. These strategies tend to outperform the broad benchmark in down markets, as [previous studies](#) have shown. However, some market participants also believe that active management fares somewhat better than the benchmark in periods of volatility and distress. In 2018, the [S&P 500®](#) rallied 10.56% in the first three quarters and lost 13.52% in the fourth; this provides a good test to compare actively managed mutual funds against passive defensive factor strategies and see which rode the rollercoaster better. In our test, we also include the [S&P 500 Equal Weight Index](#).

Different factors deliver different investment results, due to unique defensive mechanisms. In 2018, low volatility and dividends outperformed while quality lagged, compared with the median performance of all large-cap mutual funds. Over the long term, when the cyclical nature of the market had smoothed out, all these passive strategies tended to outperform the majority of actively managed mutual funds (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Percentage of All Large-Cap Mutual Funds Underperforming Defensive Factor Indices



Source: S&P Dow Jones Indices LLC. Data as of Dec. 31, 2018. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Chart is provided for illustrative purposes and reflects hypothetical historical performance. Please see the Performance Disclosure at the end of this document for more information regarding the inherent limitations associated with back-tested performance.

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In 2018, 64% of large-cap active funds underperformed the broad market, but even more managers underperformed the [S&P 500 Low Volatility Index](#) (88%) and the [S&P 500 Dividend Aristocrats](#)[®] (73%). Though quality has been considered a defensive factor, it did not perform as well as low volatility or dividends in 2018. Nearly 56% of active large-cap managers beat the [S&P 500 Quality Index](#) over the one-year period.

...but more managers underperformed the S&P 500 Low Volatility Index and the S&P 500 Dividend Aristocrats.

In the five-year period ending December 2018, the S&P 500 Low Volatility Index and S&P 500 Dividend Aristocrats outperformed over 85% of large-cap active managers. In addition, over 66% of active large-cap funds had lower returns than the S&P 500 Equal Weight Index and the S&P 500 Quality Index.

Over the longer-term 15-year period, all four factor indices outperformed more than 98% of the large-cap mutual funds. This is not surprising; these defensive factor indices have tended to have higher hit rates and excess returns in down markets (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2: Hit Rate and Monthly Average Excess Returns of Defensive Factor Indices

PERIOD	S&P 500 EQUAL WEIGHT INDEX	S&P 500 LOW VOLATILITY INDEX	S&P 500 QUALITY INDEX	S&P 500 DIVIDEND ARISTOCRATS
HIT RATE (%)				
All Months	53.07	52.19	58.77	55.70
Up Months	60.27	32.88	48.63	43.84
Down Months	40.24	86.59	76.83	76.83
MONTHLY EXCESS RETURN (%)				
All Months	0.30	0.33	0.27	0.36
Up Months	0.45	-0.74	-0.12	-0.28
Down Months	0.02	2.24	0.97	1.51

Source: S&P Dow Jones Indices LLC. Data from Dec. 31, 1999, to Dec. 31, 2018. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Table is provided for illustrative purposes and reflects hypothetical historical performance. Please see the Performance Disclosure at the end of this document for more information regarding the inherent limitations associated with back-tested performance.

Over a 15-year period, all four factor indices outperformed more than 98% of the large-cap mutual funds.

In general, we can see that dividend, quality, and low volatility stood out clearly in declining markets, with hit rates above 75%. Out of the 228 months that we studied, the S&P 500 had negative returns in 82 months. Of those months, the three factor indices outperformed over 75% of the time.

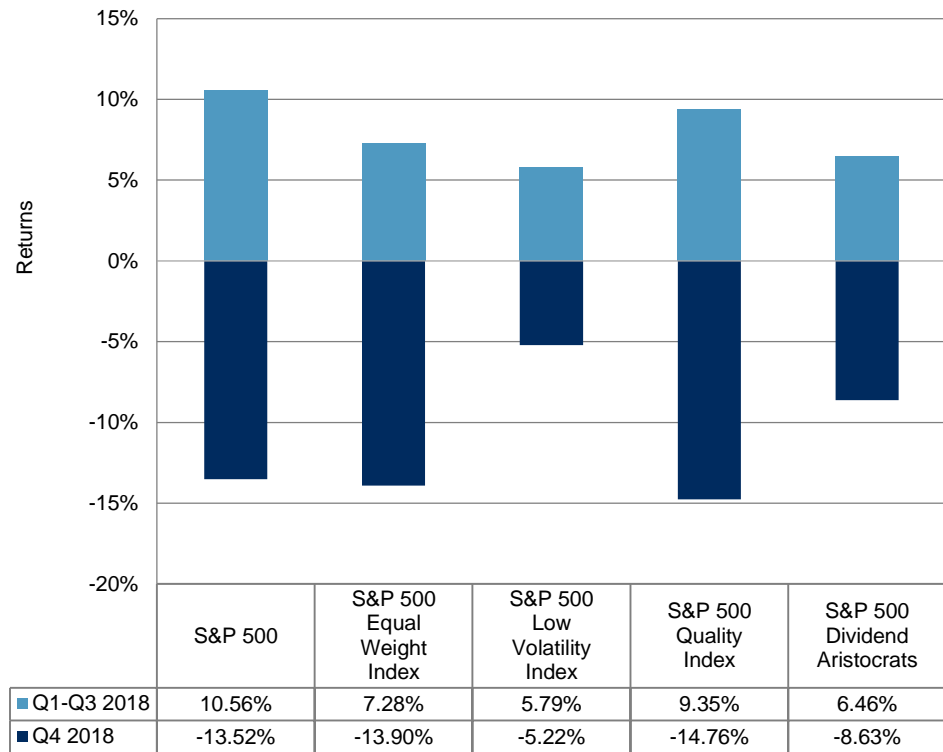
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In addition, average monthly excess rate figures show the magnitude of out- and underperformance by factors in different market environments. In general, during up markets, the excess monthly returns of these factors tended to be negative. However, a different picture emerged when the market declined. Hence, these factors have generally had defensive properties with asymmetric payoffs.

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Financial market performance in 2018 can be split into two periods. Despite the flash crash in February and heightened market volatility in April, the first three quarters saw a strong rally thanks to solid corporate earnings. However, in the fourth quarter, uncertainty over global economic growth and future Fed policy wiped out the year’s gains for many equity benchmarks. This happened in all the defensive factor strategies as well as the two reference indices (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: 2018 Index Returns



Of those months, the three factor indices outperformed over 75% of the time.

Source: S&P Dow Jones Indices LLC. Data as of Dec. 31, 2018. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Chart is provided for illustrative purposes.

The source of 2018 outperformance for low volatility and dividend was lower beta and less cyclical companies.

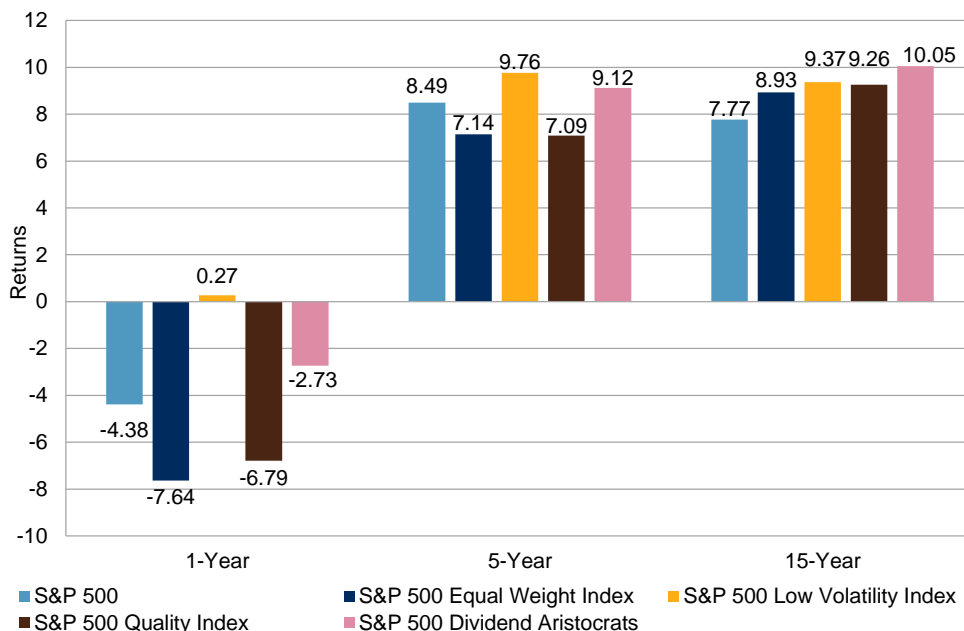
Exhibit 3 shows the source of 2018 outperformance for the low volatility and dividend factors as lower beta and less cyclical companies that lagged the broad market rally in the first three quarters but created far less drawdown in the fourth quarter market shakeup. The S&P 500 Low Volatility Index and the S&P 500 Dividend Aristocrats tend to have a higher percentage of these firms than the S&P 500.

The S&P 500 Quality Index did not fare as well in 2018 due to its sector composition. This index selects securities based on their quality score, which is a composite of three fundamental measurements: the balance sheet accruals ratio, return on equity (ROE), and financial leverage ratio. The use of a profitability metric or ROE significantly increased the index’s weight in Information Technology, which posted an 18% loss in the last quarter of 2018, while reducing the index’s allocation to Health Care, the Biotechnology industry in particular, which posted a return of 15% during the first three quarters of 2018.

Although factor returns can have cyclical tendencies in the near to mid term, empirical evidence shows that factors tend to earn higher risk-adjusted returns than the broad market over the long term. Using annualized 1-, 5-, and 10-year returns of the factor strategies, Exhibit 4 highlights the cyclical nature of factor returns in the short term and higher returns in the long term.

Factors tend to earn higher risk-adjusted returns than the broad market over the long term.

Exhibit 4: Annualized Returns of Factor Indices



Source: S&P Dow Jones Indices LLC. Data as of Dec. 31, 2018. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Chart is provided for illustrative purposes and reflects hypothetical historical performance. Please see the Performance Disclosure at the end of this document for more information regarding the inherent limitations associated with back-tested performance.

2018 performance demonstrated that defensive factor indices can provide cost-efficient downside protection.

Performance in 2018 demonstrated that investors can find cost-efficient downside protection using proper defensive factor indices. Over the long term, these factor strategies also tend to outperform the broad equity market on a risk-adjusted basis.

PERFORMANCE DISCLOSURE

The S&P 500 Dividend Aristocrats was launched on May 2, 2005. The S&P 500 Equal Weight Index was launched on January 8, 2003. The S&P 500 Quality Index was launched on July 8, 2014. The S&P 500 Low Volatility Index was launched on April 4, 2011. All information presented prior to an index's Launch Date is hypothetical (back-tested), not actual performance. The back-test calculations are based on the same methodology that was in effect on the index Launch Date. However, when creating back-tested history for periods of market anomalies or other periods that do not reflect the general current market environment, index methodology rules may be relaxed to capture a large enough universe of securities to simulate the target market the index is designed to measure or strategy the index is designed to capture. For example, market capitalization and liquidity thresholds may be reduced. Complete index methodology details are available at www.spdji.com. Past performance of the Index is not an indication of future results. Prospective application of the methodology used to construct the Index may not result in performance commensurate with the back-test returns shown.

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The back-test period does not necessarily correspond to the entire available history of the Index. Please refer to the methodology paper for the Index, available at www.spdji.com for more details about the index, including the manner in which it is rebalanced, the timing of such rebalancing, criteria for additions and deletions, as well as all index calculations.

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