

# US equities

## Campaign Warriors

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- With campaign season in full swing, stocks with relatively high exposure to policy changes will most likely experience higher volatility from now until Election Day in November.
- To weather potential election-related volatility, we recommend buying companies with less exposure to policy change proposals that could be discussed on the campaign trail.
- To identify these companies, we considered our CIO covered companies' exposure to several key policy issues including corporate taxes, healthcare reform, regulatory changes, environmental policies, and trade. We expect this stock list to perform in-line with the S&P 500 Index, with less election-related volatility.
- The time horizon for the corresponding stock list is 6-12 months, starting now through campaign season.
- This theme is focused on "sleeping better" during the campaign season, rather than attempting to identify winners/losers under various US Presidential election outcomes.



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Source: Getty Images

With roughly eight months to go until Election Day, investors are assessing the potential impact of proposed policy changes. The current political environment lends itself to deeply divergent views on either side of the aisle, leaving voters to weigh the impact of two extremes. While the proposals set forth during campaign season rarely come to fruition in their entirety, fear of sweeping changes can be reflected in stock prices during campaign season. As a result, we expect companies with greater exposure to key political issues to experience volatility as Election Day approaches. In this theme report, we highlight companies that we believe are relatively insulated (though not completely immune) from expected political noise. We expect these companies to perform in-line with the broader US equity market, while allowing investors to "sleep better" during campaign season. We do not attempt to identify winners/losers from either party's victory.

In composing our list, we considered companies' exposure to the following issues: corporate taxes, healthcare reform, regulatory changes in key sectors, environmental policies, and trade. In Fig 1, we provide an excerpt from the most recent Election Watch report that provides more detail on these topics and the potential investment implications.

## Fig. 1. Key policies to consider

For investors wondering, "what does the US election mean for my portfolio?", we explore the following factors.

At a glance	Policy likelihood	Investment view
<b>Corporate taxes</b>		
The Trump administration lowered corporate taxes with the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, but a Democratic administration would likely attempt to increase taxes.	If Trump is reelected, corporate taxes will likely remain the same—with an effort to make the cuts permanent. Democrats would try to raise additional revenue, but passing legislation could be difficult without a large majority in Congress.	Although hurdles exist, debates on the topic could raise volatility as Democratic proposals could cut earnings by up to 7%. We remain constructive on US equities but always recommend diversifying across regions to protect against local risks.
<b>Redistribution</b>		
While President Trump has proposed additional middle class tax cuts, a Democratic candidate would look to increase taxes on the wealthy. Democrats have also proposed changes to policies around minimum wage and social security.	Wealth tax proposals are unlikely to pass Congress, although estate taxes and capital gains taxes for high earners could be raised. Higher top tax rates and increases to the federal minimum wage are likely with a Democratic president.	When tax planning, maximizing flexibility can be more effective than trying to predict future tax rates. Investors can diversify savings across a mix of taxable, tax-deferred, and tax-exempt accounts.
<b>Health reform</b>		
While President Trump has weakened the Affordable Care Act, Democrats would likely look to preserve or expand public healthcare coverage. Both President Trump and Democratic candidates support drug pricing reform.	While "Medicare for All" would be difficult to pass, an expansion of public healthcare coverage would be more likely under Democrats. Some form of drug pricing restriction is possible under either administration.	Debates over coverage and drug pricing will likely spark volatility in the healthcare sector. Any disruption to private insurance markets and limiting the pricing power of healthcare companies could hurt the sector, although some legislative risk is included in current valuations. Investors should remain diversified across sectors.
<b>Sector regulation (technology, communication, and financial)</b>		
Both President Trump and Democratic candidates have increased scrutiny on technology giants amid antitrust and data privacy concerns. Within the financial sector, President Trump's regulatory appointees have eased Dodd-Frank Act rules somewhat, while Democrats would likely look to reverse more industry-friendly regulatory interpretations.	Regardless of the administration, breaking up tech companies is unlikely in the near term as antitrust cases can take a long time to be resolved. Exact financial regulatory proposals are still unclear. However, Democrat calls for breaking up big banks are not likely to lead to legislative changes.	Investors should prepare for greater volatility in election-sensitive sectors. The potential threats of increased regulation and breaking up larger companies would raise compliance costs and constrain profitability. Investors should remain diversified across equity sectors and hedge concerns by investing in companies with exposure to longer-term trends such as digital transformation.
<b>Environmental policy</b>		
The Trump administration has loosened environmental regulations, while Democratic candidates would almost certainly strengthen them.	While the ambitious proposal called the Green New Deal is unlikely to pass with a divided Congress, a Democrat in the White House could take measures to increase environmental regulation by executive order. President Trump would be likely to continue to loosen regulation.	Companies connected to clean energy, clean air, carbon reduction, and energy efficiency could benefit from regulatory action taken by a Democratic administration and could offer a hedge against the risk of more burdensome environmental legislation for the carbon-based energy sector.
<b>Trade policy</b>		
A reelected President Trump would likely continue his aggressive trade tactics. Democratic candidates are unlikely to adopt a more conciliatory approach.	Both President Trump and Democratic candidates are likely to maintain a hard stance on trade during negotiations with China. Democrats may take softer positions with allies, such as the EU.	Investors should continue to diversify globally and favor companies that are less trade- and investment-dependent.

Below we briefly discuss our stock selection rationale for each sector represented in our stock list.

### **Communication Services**

The communication services sector has three key drivers: content, connectivity, and advertising, which are exposed to strong secular trends regardless of the election outcome. The sector also has a relatively low international revenue mix, reducing the downside risk related to tariff concerns. The most prominent risk for the sector is regulatory risk. Large internet companies in this sector are highly exposed, with both Democrats and Republicans voicing their concerns on data privacy and monopolistic powers. When selecting companies for this list, we attempted to avoid the companies most heavily exposed to these policy risks. Instead, we preferred companies with diverse revenue streams or diversified content as it pertains to streaming.

**Authors: Kevin Dennean & Reid Gilligan**

### **Consumer Staples & Consumer Discretionary**

Generally, the consumer sectors are somewhat insulated from political noise. More specifically, the consumer discretionary sector is more exposed to the overall economic environment rather than policy changes. The notable exception for both consumer staples and discretionary companies is trade policy. With the US and China having signed a Phase 1 deal, the downside risk for increased tariffs has momentarily subsided, but related headline risk could persist. In our view, consumer companies with strong brands should be able to better withstand any potential flare-up of tensions throughout campaign season. We also took company pricing power into consideration, as it relates to the companies' ability to withstand tariffs. In addition, the Democratic party has not yet voiced any extreme views on the matter, which should reduce the possibility of extreme binary outcomes on either side. Finally, we expressed a preference for consumer staples companies in our selection, since these stocks tend to be more defensive.

**Author: Robert Samuels**

### **Energy**

In the energy sector, companies are exposed to political rhetoric on both sides of the aisle. The Democratic candidates favor tighter environmental regulations that, if instated, would be a headwind for the US oil and gas industry, particularly those with fracking exposure. A Republican victory, while more positive, may imply potential headwinds from a failure of execution of phase-one commitments regarding oil, natural gas, and or refined products exported from the US, and/or further escalation of trade tensions with China or elsewhere. As a result, we did not include any energy companies on our stock list.

**Author: Nicole Decker**

### **Financials**

The election poses two main risks for US Financials, in our opinion, including regulatory risk and headline risk. While legislative changes are less likely due to Congressional checks and balances, regulations and rule interpretations can change based on the ideologies of a given candidate. Also, negative news reports pose broad risks for the sector as candidates' more jaundiced views are revealed. That said, certain pockets of the sector are less exposed than others and could even benefit from heightened uncertainty. In fact, increased

uncertainty as we approach election day could drive increased market volatility which could in turn drive higher volumes for the major exchanges.

**Author: Bradley Ball**

### **Healthcare**

The healthcare sector is perhaps one of the most exposed sectors to political rhetoric we've seen so far in this election cycle. In our view, the extreme policy proposals we've seen from the left are unlikely to be passed in their entirety. However, there is large headline risk associated with any potential for regulatory changes. The talk of Medicare for All has weighed on HMOs, and drug pricing scrutiny from both parties has weighed on pharmaceutical companies. We expect these headwinds to persist throughout the election season, and we have not included any healthcare companies on this stock list.

### **Information Technology**

Similar to the communication services sector, regulatory risk is a key risk factor for companies in the information technology sector. Trade policy will also be a significant factor for the group moving forward. Of the group, we prefer companies that have thus far remained out of the regulatory spotlight. We also have a favorable view of companies with pricing power, or with exposure to longer term secular drivers, such as digital data or cloud services.

**Authors: Kevin Dennean & Reid Gilligan**

### **Industrials & Materials**

Both the industrials and the materials sectors are without a doubt exposed to trade policy, as well as tax flows and regulatory changes. Of the group, we view companies with pricing power favorably as well as companies with defensive growth characteristics. These characteristics should act as a relative buffer for the companies on this list as it relates to trade and other policy risks.

**Author: Adam Scheiner**

### **Real Estate**

Potential changes to monetary and fiscal policy could occur depending upon the outcome of the election which could put upward pressure on interest rates. Historically REITs have not fared well in a rising rate environment. However, we believe that the widespread adoption of 5G and continued growth of the mobile-centric world will continue irrespective of the election outcome. We view the wireless towers as well positioned to benefit from what will be a strong secular trend, both domestically and globally.

**Author: Jonathan Woloshin**

## Utilities

Utilities tend to be a defensive sector by nature, but they are exposed to policy risk. That said, the improving economics of renewables provide support for utilities with renewable exposure, even in the event of continued support for fossil fuels from the right. The renewal of the solar tax incentive last year also suggests a Republican win would not be damaging for the group. Should a Democrat gain in popularity, this would be generally positive for electric utilities with renewable exposure. State regulation of utilities should balance the risks that could develop if Democrats push against fossil fuels. For this reason, we have narrowed our selection for this list to regulated utilities with a diverse electricity mix including renewables, and minimum natural gas distribution exposure.

**Author: James Dobson**

## Valuation & time horizon

The stock list has traded at a premium to the S&P 500 over the past five years, on average. Currently, the list is trading roughly one standard deviation above its average premium on a price-to-earnings basis (Fig. 2). The higher than average premium is in part due to recent rotation into defensive sectors in the face of market uncertainty.

Over the past 30 days, our stock list has experienced less volatility than the broader S&P 500 Index. We expect these companies to experience less election-related volatility in the coming months and expect the list to perform roughly in line with the broader US equity market.

The time horizon for the list intends to capture the period of uncertainty during campaign season. We do not attempt to predict a winner of the election, and the list is not positioned to benefit from either candidate's victory.

## Risks

Our list includes a number of companies that have sector-related risk exposure to the election. We have attempted to mitigate that by selecting the companies with less policy risk than their industry peers. For example, the financial sector is undoubtedly exposed to "anti-Wall St." rhetoric, as well as sweeping regulatory changes, but the companies we have included, in our view, carry less regulatory risk relative to the larger banks, and we believe any increase in market volatility could drive higher volumes for major exchanges.

Another risk lies in the market discounting the chances of a democratic victory. Currently, market expectations are pricing in a Trump victory. If this sentiment is unwavering throughout campaign season, that would in turn diminish the relative volatility-adjusted performance of the stock list. If the Presidential race is not viewed as competitive, the sensitivity of the broader index to campaign headlines could be low. This would detract from the relative advantage we expect our stock list to enjoy.

The sector allocation of the list poses a risk as well, since we do not have any companies from some sectors like energy and healthcare. The list could underperform the broader market if the energy sector experiences a swift recovery after its recent underperformance. A sharper recovery from the coronavirus than expected by the market could be a tailwind for energy companies, and thus, a headwind for the relative performance of the stock list. Similarly, if the market

begins to heavily discount the chances of a Democratic victory, the healthcare sector could pick up some lost ground, detracting from the relative performance of our list.

Lastly, the companies on this list are by no means exempt from other systematic risks. The list is especially exposed to a slowdown in consumer spending, given the tilt towards consumer-based companies. If consumers crimp spending to wait for election clarity, that could pose a risk to positive fundamental backdrop that we currently see. Similarly, a broad based slowdown due to the coronavirus or other macro-impactful events would be a negative for the list as a whole.

## Appendix

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