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Why Economic and Capital Market Forecasting Is Flawed and Not A Science
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In March 2007, during a presentation to Congress, then Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke stated: “At this juncture the impact on the broader economy and financial markets of the problems in the subprime market seem likely to be contained.” He went on to say: “Overall the economy appears likely to expand at a moderate pace during the upcoming quarters.” Several months after Bernanke’s remarks to Congress, the U.S. experienced a seismic banking crisis and collapses of the equity and credit markets not witnessed since the Great Depression. With the many economists on his staff and sophisticated economic models at his fingertips, he was unaware of the massive economic crises only months away.

Forty years ago, Nobel Laureate Friedrich Hayek said: “Not only were economists unsure about their predictions, but their tendency to present their findings with certainty of the language of science were misleading and had deplorable effects.” In September 2017 (per Adam Shaw), Prakash Loungani of the International Monetary Fund, reviewed the accuracy of economic forecasters and found that only two (2) of the past 150 recessions were predicted in advance. It would appear in the words of Mark Pearson, of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris, “We are getting worse at making forecasts because the world is getting more complicated.”

Wall Street strategists now practice “the art of the plausible.” With the understanding that markets in any given year are inherently unpredictable, they construct a reasonable forecast using consensus assumptions. Yet what is plausible is not always probable, as the ultimate outcome (Michael Santoli, CNBC). The consensus strategist forecast for the S&P 500 typically falls in the 5% to 10% range. Currently, CNBC’s strategist survey shows an average predicted 2020 S&P 500 gain of 5% with the maximum forecast of 9%. This range seems reasonable since the long-term average annualized gain for U.S. stocks is around 8%. Yet counterintuitively, the short term rarely conforms to the long-term average. Since 1928, the S&P has only showed a gain of between 5% and 10% six out of the 91 calendar years – suggesting the consensus forecast for a high-single-digit rise in 2020 has a 93% chance of being wrong.

Going into 2019, equities were at bear market levels and strategists, as a group were looking for a rebound of 11%. This would simply have the index recovering back to its prior record high. Actual experience for 2019 was a huge run higher in stocks with the S&P 500 up over 31%. Moody’s reported in 2018: “It is smart to assume the price-to-earnings multiples will moderate by late 2018 because the end of this already-long expansion will be 12-months closer.” To the contrary, the S&P 500 experienced a multiple expansion from 14.4x to 18.2x on its forward P/E in 2019.

It is BCA’s view that Wall Street firms make predictions because their clients want to be informed, but in fact, stock and bond predictions invite investors to react by changing asset allocations and generating fees to their advisers. The problem with forecasting anything is that a small change in a few variables can make predictions impossibly complex. Reliable and meaningful predictions of capital markets is inherently impossible. It is not a science and remains an art.