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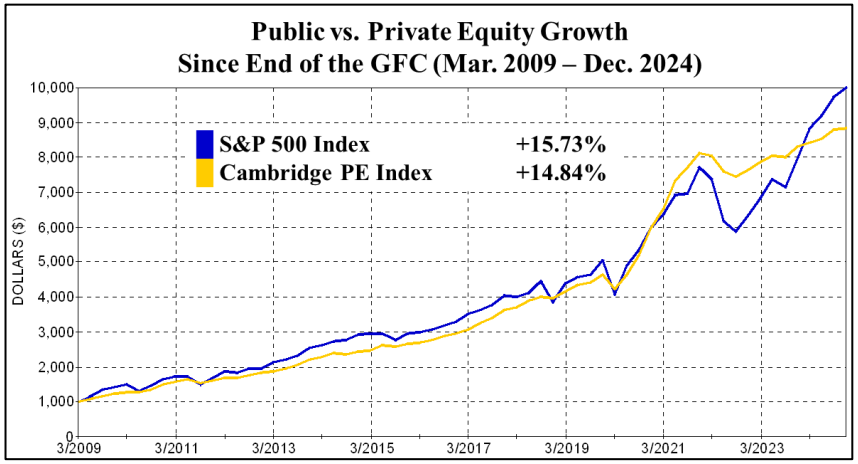
Private Equity Has a NAV Valuation Confidence Problem

July 2025

The valuation of publicly traded companies (stocks) is determined by investors through the daily market trading mechanism. However, in the case of non-publicly traded private equity companies, an estimation, or the net asset value (NAV) is determined internally. This approach nearly eliminates price volatility, with the true price of these private assets is not being reflected until a sale or new round of fundraising has taken place. Jefferies's Private Capital Advisory compiled a list of secondary transactions for the first half of 2024 that included buyout, credit, real estate, and venture with a range of discounts from 6% (buyout) to 30% (venture). For illustrative purposes, we will use an average discount of 11%. The Center for Research (Boston College) reported that pension funds in year 2022 allocated 24% to private equity and real estate. Using the above discount assumption of 11%, this would suggest investment returns being overstated by 2.6% (11% x 24%).

Harvard University's endowment fund was recently valued at $53 billion, of which $23 billion was invested in private equity funds (WSJ). Rep. Elise Stefanik (R. NY) is pursuing a SEC investigation into Harvard's financial disclosures to bond holders, arguing that since much of Harvard's endowment is invested in private equity, there is the possibility that overstated valuation estimates are being used in the underwriting of the bonds issued by the University. Providing support to the Representative's argument, Harvard itself disclosed in its 2022 annual report that the endowment's strongest performers, venture capital and private equity, had not been marked (price adjusted) to reflect general market conditions.



The discrepancies in valuation between market prices (real time) and internal estimates becomes a problem when money needs to be raised but there are too few bidders. This liquidity dilemma has created a loophole for secondary firms, allowing them to buy companies from private equity at a discount, to then immediately mark the assets back up to the higher NAV, creating a large one-time return.

A cautionary shift in sentiment towards private equity may be underway. "Funds are getting older, and the holds are getting longer," said Finbarr O'Connor, Treo's CIO. A slowdown in mergers and acquisitions since 2022 has reduced private equity investor returns (WSJ). State Steet's private equity index reported a 7.1% return in 2024 (Financial Times), compared to 25.0% for the S&P 500 index. This marks the first time since 2000 that private markets trailed this US large-cap equity index during one, three, five, and 10-year periods (Financial Times). Private equity managers have been adversely impacted over the past five years as the benefits of leverage and price multiple expansion have evaporated. As interest rates skyrocketed in 2022, rising borrowing

costs and collapsing valuations closed the exit doors, thus making it difficult to return capital to investors. Price discovery is finally at work in narrowing the gap between real valuations and NAV, after the long delay brought on by the absence of investor liquidity. This lag of information may have adversely impacted investment decisions for institutions reliant on the internal pricing estimates of their private investments.

Private investments do not undergo the same scrutiny as publicly traded stocks and bonds. Following the 1929 stock market crash and depression, the Securities Act of 1933 known as the "Truth in Securities" Act was instituted to regulate the offer and sale of securities. The intent was to protect investors by requiring full and fair disclosure of securities for public sale and to prevent fraud and misrepresentation, the foundation of today's securities law. Soon after, the Securities Act of 1934 became law aimed at giving the SEC broad powers to regulate exchanges, identify fraud, and impose penalties while requiring ongoing company disclosures and transparency.

The private equity industry lacks the regulatory oversight needed to protect investors. General partnerships should seek third party valuation services that provide independent quarterly valuations and move away from internal NAV estimates. Given this lack of regulatory oversight, it is critical to practice high level due diligence on any private equity product before recommending it be added to an investment portfolio. To mitigate the risk of the illiquid nature of private investments, plans should consider limiting exposure within their overall portfolio.

Source:
https://www.jefferies.com/insights/the-big-picture/mid-year-review-a-record-breaking-1h-of-2024-for-the-secondary-market;
https://www.ft.com/content/c21a5ca9-6175-498a-bf32-9c91e4366085;
https://www.wsj.com/finance/investing/private-equity-caught-in-crosshairs-of-elise-stefaniks-attack-on-harvard-e5088539;