

THE STAN CLARK FINANCIAL TEAM'S

PERSPECTIVES

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Asset Allocation

STOCKS VS. BONDS OVER THE PAST 151 YEARS

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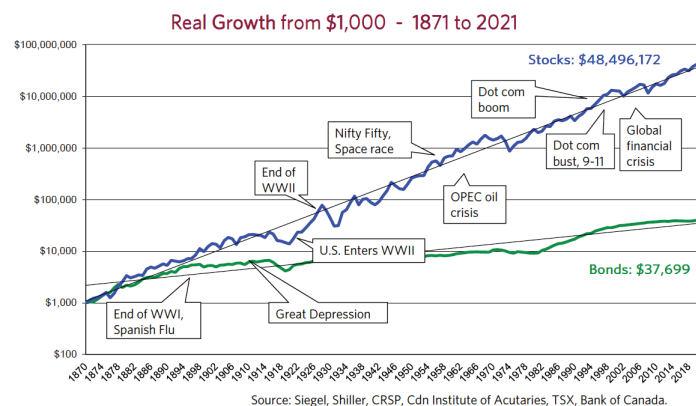
In Aesop's fable *The Tortoise and the Hare*, slow and steady wins the race. But is that really how it works in life? When it comes to investing, slow and steady can be a recipe for near-certain losses.

Let's look at stocks vs. bonds returns over the past 151 years. Think of *The Tortoise and the Hare* as a story about asset allocation: of bonds, which appreciate slowly and appear reliable; and of stocks, which can appreciate strongly and quickly, but appear risky. Which is your best bet? The answer depends on what kind of race you're running.

The past 151 years have been wildly volatile: inflation, deflation, a deep depression, two global financial crises, explosive growth, two World Wars, embargoes, assassinations and worldwide pandemics. We often forget how frightening things seemed at the time. Although the world may seem scary now, it's likely that the period ahead won't be all that different from some of the periods we've experienced in the past. History repeats itself; you just don't know which part of the past you're going to get! But the past informs the future. By studying history, you can get a good idea of the range of possible outcomes going forward.

Data shows that, over the past 151 years, if you owned equal amounts of Canadian and U.S. stocks you would have enjoyed average annual growth of 9.6% (in Cdn dollars) for an inflation-adjusted (real) return of 7.6%. Over the same period, Canadian bonds averaged 4.5%, or real returns of just 2.5% per year.

Here's a graph showing 151 years of growth in stocks vs. bonds. If you started with \$1,000 in each, you would now have over \$48.5 million with stocks, but only about \$38,000 with bonds. Remember that these are in "real" dollars, that is, adjusted for inflation.



Source: Siegel, Shiller, CRSP, Cdn Institute of Actuaries, TSX, Bank of Canada.

The following table shows the average percentage growth in stocks vs. bonds over the past 151 years.

It also compares the differences in median total dollar growth over various time horizons.

151-Year Returns

Growth in stocks vs. bonds 1871 to 2021

	Average Nominal Returns	Average Real* Returns	Real growth from \$100,000				
			1 Year	5 Years	10 Years	15 Years	20 Years
Stocks	9.6%	7.6%	\$7,559	\$48,759	\$111,884	\$187,809	\$306,287
Bonds	4.5%	2.5%	\$2,483	\$10,180	\$20,240	\$30,518	\$49,372
Inflation	2.1%						
Difference in growth (\$)			+\$5,076	+\$38,579	+\$91,644	+\$157,291	+\$256,915
Difference in growth	2.1x	3.0x	3.0x	4.8x	5.5x	6.2x	6.2x

Source: Siegel, Shiller, CRSP, Cdn Institute of Actuaries, TSX, Bank of Canada.

* "Real" returns are nominal returns after subtracting inflation

** "Real growth from \$100,000" is the median real growth over different time periods, showing the effect of compounding.

The average real returns from stocks were three times higher than those of bonds. If you started with \$100,000 in bonds, this would have grown by about \$49,000 after 20 years. The same amount invested in stocks would have grown by \$306,000 – more than six times as much!

Now, you may be asking: But aren't stocks much riskier than bonds? Yes and no. The stock market is volatile in the short term, making stocks seem risky. But if you invest for the longer term, that is, more than 10 years, history shows that down markets have almost always been more than offset by up markets, giving reliable returns for stocks after inflation.

Inflation can actually make bonds riskier than stocks over the long term. The worst 10-year period for bonds was about the same as the worst 10-year period for stocks, yet the average returns for bonds are only a third as much as stocks. The chance of losing money over any 10-year period was about four times greater for bonds than it was for stocks. Over any 10-year period, stocks did better than bonds 89% of the time. And, over 15- and 20-year periods, stocks beat bonds nearly every time and never failed to beat inflation. So, based on history, the longer your investment horizon, the less risky stocks are, and the riskier bonds become. At the same time, the extra returns from stocks vs. bonds grow dramatically.

The key takeaway here is that one type of asset isn't always better. How long you can invest for is critical in determining the right mix for you. If you only have a few years to invest, then most of your money should be in bonds. If you have savings earmarked for needs five to 10 years or more from now, consider investing more of those savings into stocks.

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