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America at 250

A view from capital markets

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Global Investment Tracker SPECIAL EDITION

Introduction

Two hundred and fifty years ago, the United States was a startup economy. Today it is the world's largest, and its capital markets reflect that scale:

U.S.-based issuers represent 72% of global stocks and roughly half of global bonds. The U.S. also accounts for 61% of global private-capital investment, spanning private equity, private credit, and real assets.

America's 250th is an occasion to examine how that position was built — and how it continues to shift. Here we chart U.S. stock performance across the past century, trace how the U.S. share of global equity has evolved over the past 30 years and track which companies have held the title of most valuable at different points in time.

What the data show is not a static picture. Markets realign. Economies that once seemed peripheral move to the center. The U.S. itself was once an emerging market.

The charts that follow trace part of that story.

Linda-Eling Lee
Founding Director
MSCI Institute

Highlights

$100 invested in U.S. equities in 1926 would be $1.7 million today. The 17,000-fold increase spans the Great Depression and world wars to the pandemic and beyond.

U.S. stocks represent nearly three-quarters of global market value across developed-market equities. That’s up from 44% in 1997. The shift accelerated after the global financial crisis, driven by the concentration of the world's most valuable technology companies in a single market.

Market value and employment have decoupled across the U.S. economy. Information technology now accounts for a third of U.S. equity market value while employing just 2% of the workforce. In health care and industrials, the opposite is true — both sectors employ far more workers than their market weight would suggest.

Only four companies have held the title of America's most valuable over the past 25 years — and today's valuations dwarf anything that came before. NVIDIA, the current leader at USD 4.6 trillion, is worth nearly eight times as much as Microsoft at its peak in 2000.

The largest U.S. companies have grown to the scale of entire national stock markets. NVIDIA alone is worth more than the listed equities of any country outside the U.S. and Japan. The Magnificent Seven combined exceed the equity markets of many of the world's major economies.

What would $100 invested in U.S. equities a century ago be worth today?

- **A century of U.S. markets turned $100 into $1.7 million.** That 17,000-fold increase is the power of compounding — and it survived the Great Depression, two world wars, multiple recessions, a global financial crisis and a pandemic.
- **The biggest crashes look small in retrospect.** The Great Depression wiped out more than 80% of market value between 1929 and 1932. On a log scale, that collapse is clearly visible — yet the market recovered fully within two decades and kept compounding. The oil shocks of the 1970s, the dot-com crash of 2000 and the global financial crisis of 2008 each looked catastrophic at the time. None permanently interrupted the long-run trajectory.
- **Half the total wealth creation happened in the last 30 years.** It took roughly 70 years, to the mid-1990s, for $100 to grow to around $5,000. The next 30 years took it to $1.7 million — a reflection of both the extraordinary value created in the technology era and the accelerating effect of compounding at scale.

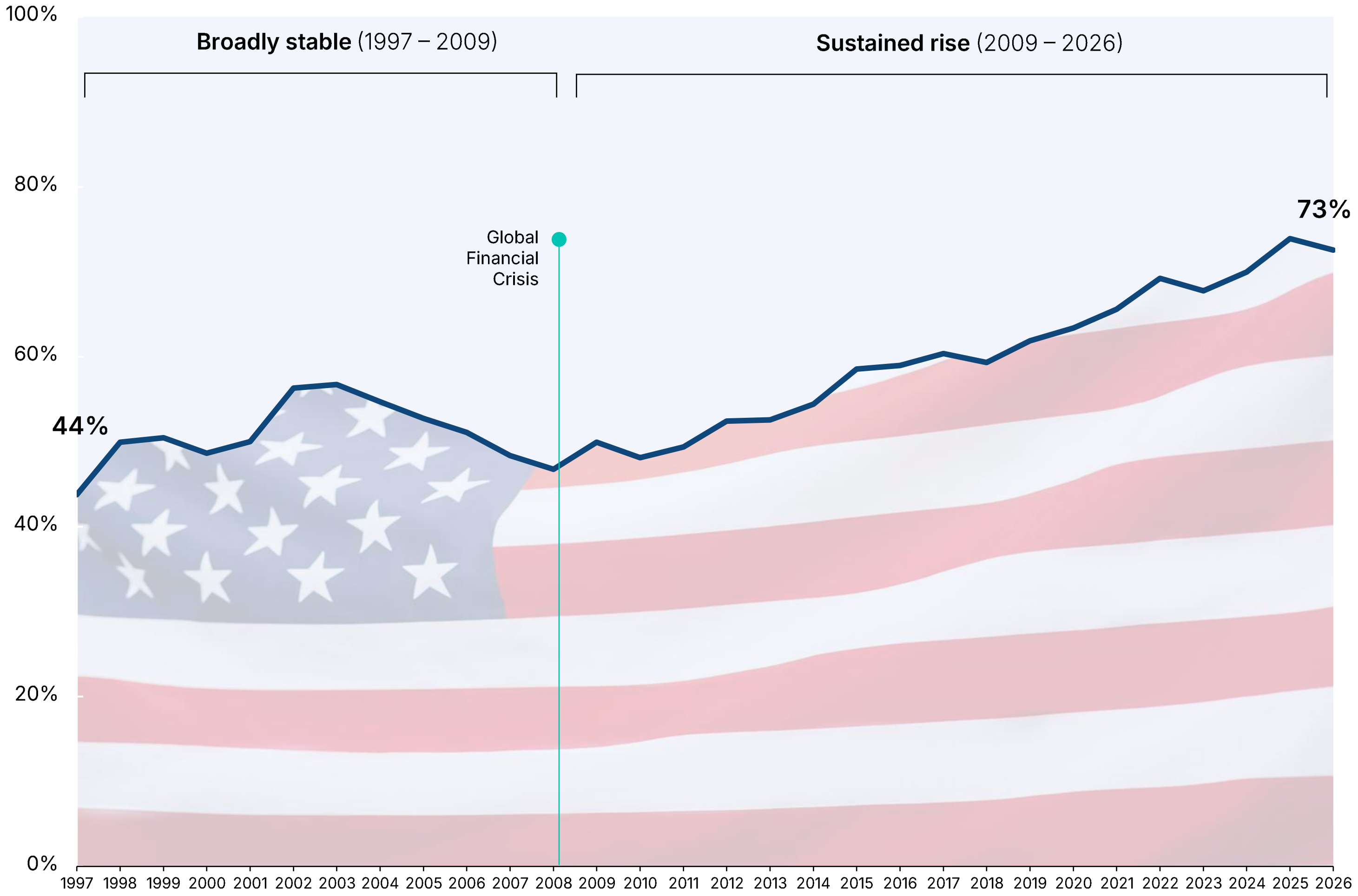
Growth of $100 invested in U.S. equities (1926-2026)

Source: MSCI Institute, based on data in the MSCI USA Index (December 1969–May 2026) and the Kenneth French Data Library (July 1926–November 1969). The two series join in December 1969 and should be treated as illustrative rather than a single continuous index. Returns are gross total return in USD with dividends reinvested and are nominal. No taxes, transaction costs or fees have been deducted. A logarithmic scale is used so that equal vertical distances represent equal proportional gains.

How has the U.S. share of global developed-market equities changed over time?

- **The U.S. has gone from representing less than half of developed-market equity value to nearly three quarters.** The U.S. accounted for 44% of the MSCI World Index in 1997. By April 2026, that share had reached 73%.
- **The growth took off after the global financial crisis — and hasn’t stopped.** The U.S. weight fluctuated between 44% and 57% for the first decade of the series, falling below 50% twice during periods of outperformance by commodity markets and European equities, respectively. The shift became clear from 2009 onward, driven by the concentration of the world's most valuable technology companies in a single market.
- **Other markets also grew, but shrank in comparison as a share of the total market.** Japan represented nearly 18% of the MSCI World Index in the late 1980s; today it is less than 6%. The U.K. has fallen from over 10% to under 4%. France, Germany and the rest of Europe have followed. Their markets have not shrunk in absolute terms — the U.S. has simply grown so much faster that everything else has been diluted in relative terms.

U.S. weight in the MSCI World Index (%)



Source: MSCI Institute, based on MSCI index data. The chart shows the weight of the U.S. within the MSCI World Index, which comprises large- and mid-cap equities across 23 developed markets, at the first business day of each year from 1997 to 2025, and as of May 28, 2026. Countries and country weights reflect each market's share of total free float-adjusted market capitalization within the index. World ex-USA weight is the residual.

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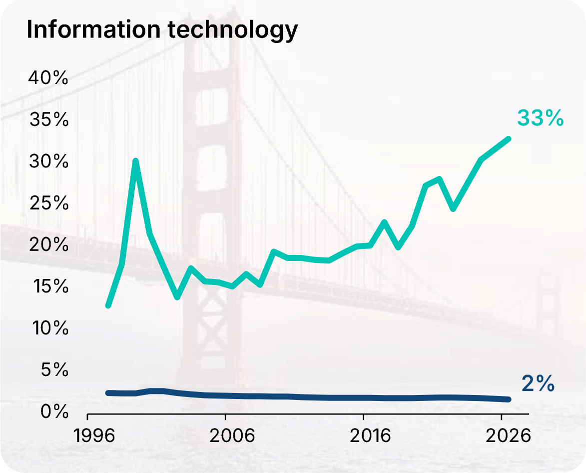
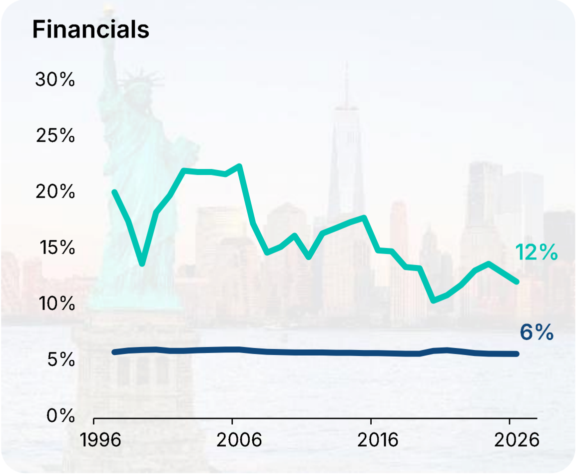
Which sectors have grown in market value versus share of employment?

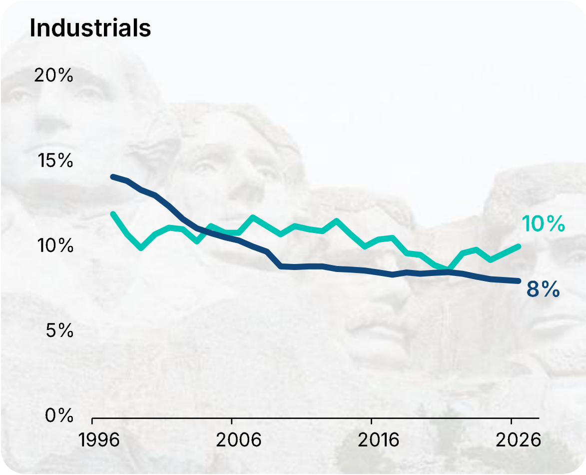
U.S. equity market-cap share vs. employment share, by sector (%)

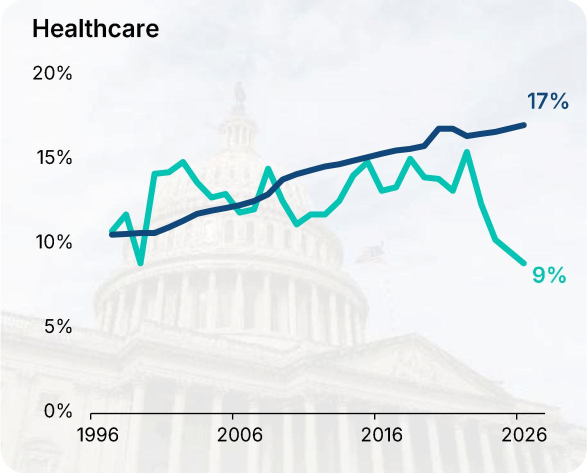
Share of US equity market capitalization (MSCI USA IMI, GICS)

Share of employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics nonfarm payrolls, NAICS)









IT captures a third of equity value while employing 1 in 50 workers. IT's market-cap share has grown from 13% in 1997 to 33% as of April 30, 2026, while its share of U.S. employment has remained roughly the same. The sector shows how scalable, technology-driven business models have generated substantial market value without proportional growth in employment.

Financials fell following the global financial crisis while employment held steady. Financials' share of U.S. market value peaked at 22% in the mid-2000s before falling during the global financial crisis. The sector's share of employment, however, has also held steady, near 6% through the boom, crisis and recovery.

Industrials maintained market relevance despite a shrinking workforce. The share of Americans who work in the industrials sector fell from 14% to 8% between 1997 and 2026, while the sector's share of U.S. market value remained close to 10% throughout the period. The divergence reflects long-term gains in productivity and automation.

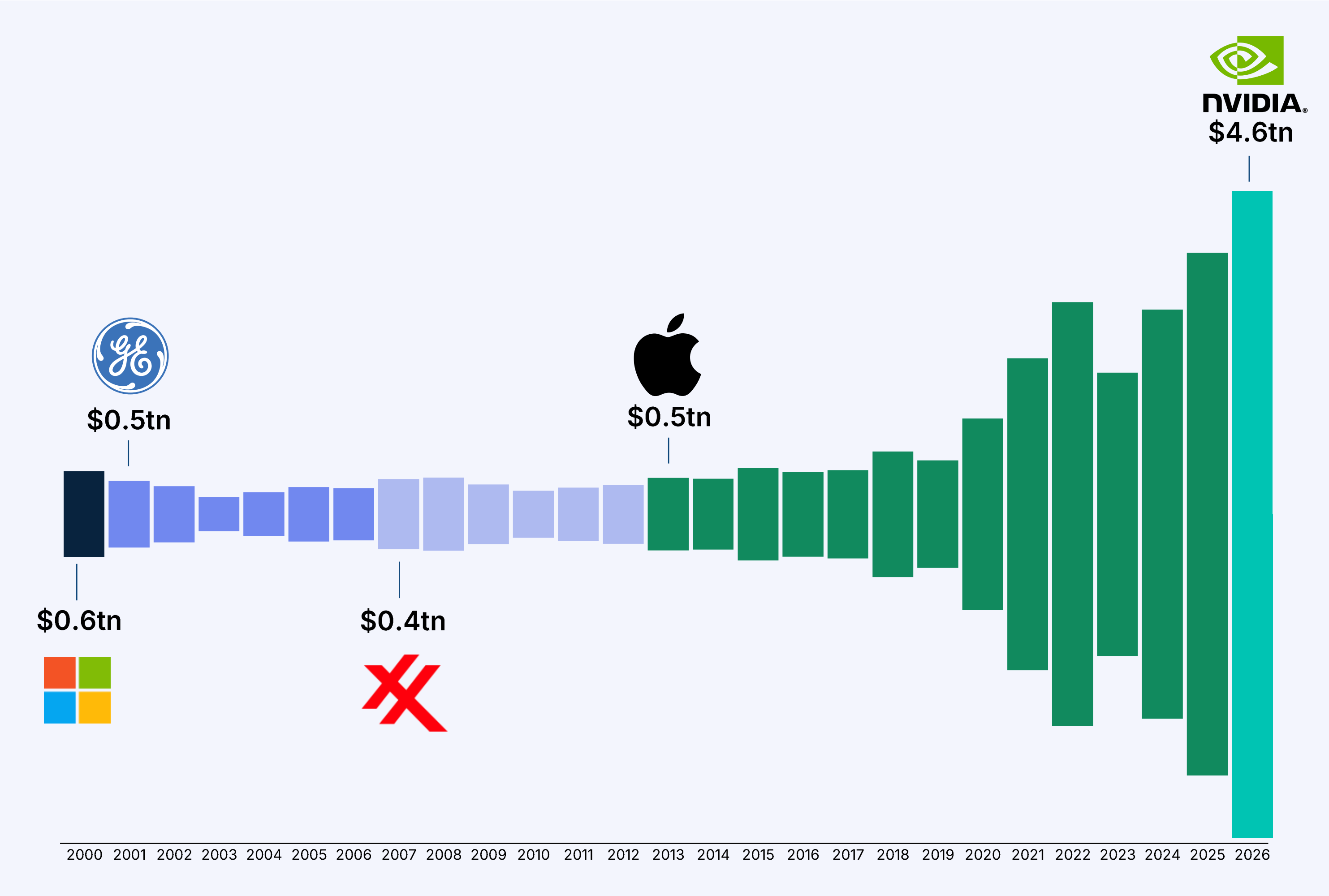
Healthcare employs more workers than its market weight suggests. Healthcare's employment share has grown from 11% to 17%, reflecting the aging U.S. population. Yet its share of market value has fluctuated within a narrow range — a reflection of how labor-intensive the sector remains.

MSCI Institute analysis based on constituents of the MSCI USA Investable Market Index (IMI) and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) nonfarm payroll data. Sectors are based on the Global Industry Classification Standard (GICS®) jointly developed by MSCI and S&P Dow Jones Indices. Share of market capitalization reflects the weight of each sector within the MSCI USA IMI. Employment shares are derived from BLS nonfarm payroll data mapped from NAICS-based industries to the corresponding GICS sectors. Because employment covers the broader economy while market capitalization reflects listed companies, comparisons are intended to illustrate broad trends rather than precise sector equivalence.

What have been America's most-valuable companies?

- **America's most valuable company has changed hands only four times in 25 years.** General Electric dominated the early 2000s, ExxonMobil held the position through the financial crisis, Apple held it for over a decade, and NVIDIA claimed it most recently. Four companies, a quarter century — corporate dominance at the top is rarer than it looks.
- **The scale of today's valuations is without precedent.** Microsoft was considered extraordinarily valuable at USD 0.6 trillion in 2000. NVIDIA is now worth nearly eight times that. The bars from 2000 through 2019 illustrate that the entire concept of what a large company is worth has been rewritten in the last five years.
- **NVIDIA's ascent to the top is the steepest on record.** Every previous leadership change was gradual, with one company slowly overtaking another over several years. NVIDIA reached the top in a remarkably short window, driven by the market's conviction that artificial intelligence represents one of the largest capital opportunities in history.

Market capitalization (USD trillions)

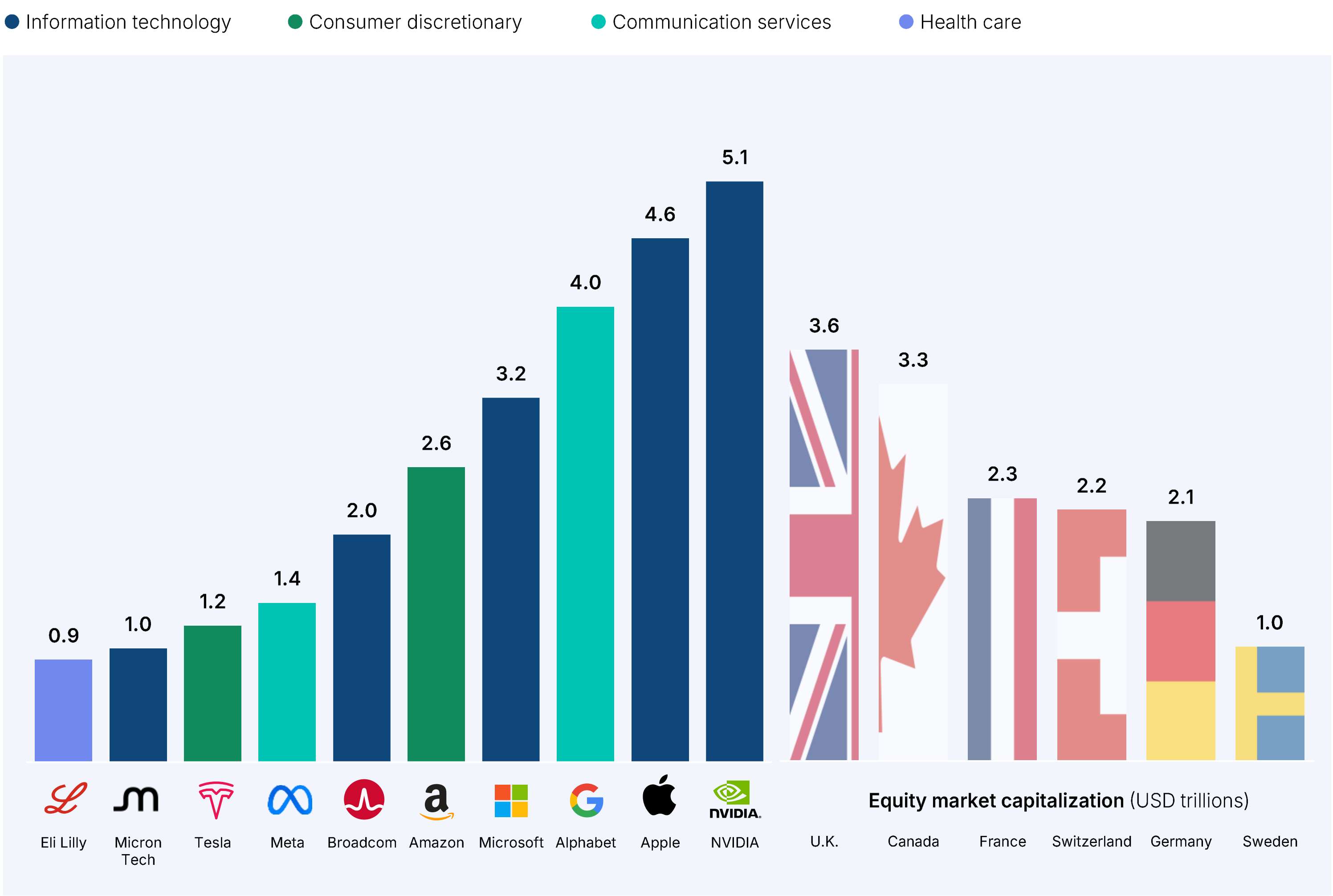


Source: MSCI Institute, based on MSCI index data. The chart shows the free float-adjusted market capitalization of the largest U.S. constituent of the MSCI USA Index at the first business day of each year from 2000 to 2026.

How big are America's largest companies?

- **The largest U.S. companies now dwarf entire national stock markets.** The value of NVIDIA, at USD 5.1 trillion as of May 29, 2026, exceeds the equity market of any single country outside the U.S. and Japan. Apple alone, at USD 4.6 trillion, is worth more than the entire U.K. equity market. Alphabet's market value surpasses France's. Microsoft's is roughly equal to Canada's entire equity market. Amazon exceeds South Korea's. Meta alone is larger than Australia's.
- **The Magnificent Seven tech stocks combined are worth more than the equity markets of many of the world's major economies.** What was once a useful shorthand for a group of unusually large companies now describes entities of sovereign scale — not in political terms, but in the language of capital markets that investors and policymakers use to allocate resources and measure economic weight.

Market capitalization (USD trillions)



Source: MSCI Institute, based on MSCI index data. The chart shows the free float-adjusted market capitalization of the largest U.S. constituents of the MSCI USA Index as of May 29, 2026. Country equity market figures reflect the free float-adjusted market capitalization of the corresponding MSCI country index.

About

Authors

Rumi Mahmood is the Institute's research director for EMEA and APAC.

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Data in this report

Listed companies referenced in this report are constituents of the **MSCI ACWI IMI Index**, which captures large-, mid- and small-cap representation across 23 developed and 24 emerging market countries. As of April 30, 2026, the index comprises 8,233 companies and captures approximately 99% of the global equity investment opportunity set.

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