THREE ON THURSDAY

First Trust

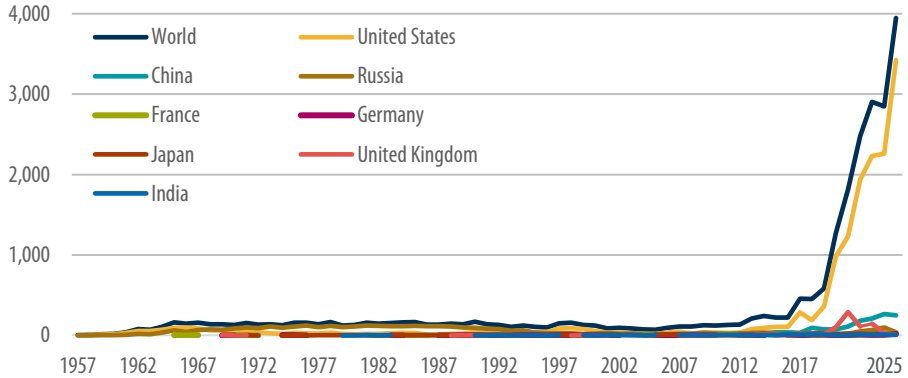
FIRST TRUST ECONOMICS

January 15, 2026

The Space Launch Boom Accelerates

This past week, SpaceX received federal approval to dramatically increase the size of its Starlink constellation, clearing the way for the launch of an additional 7,500 satellites into low-Earth orbit. While this would have seemed impossible a decade ago, the space industry hardly bats an eye today, as mega-constellations like Starlink have become an increasingly familiar component of modern infrastructure. This shift underscores the rapid advances in spaceflight technology that have reduced the cost of launching payloads into orbit. From the iconic Apollo missions of the 1960s to today's cutting edge innovations, breakthroughs in materials science and propulsion—driven largely by private companies like SpaceX—have brought down what were once astronomical costs. This reduction is making space more accessible, fostering competition, and unlocking new possibilities for scientific research, infrastructure, and even tourism. For more insights, check out the three charts below.

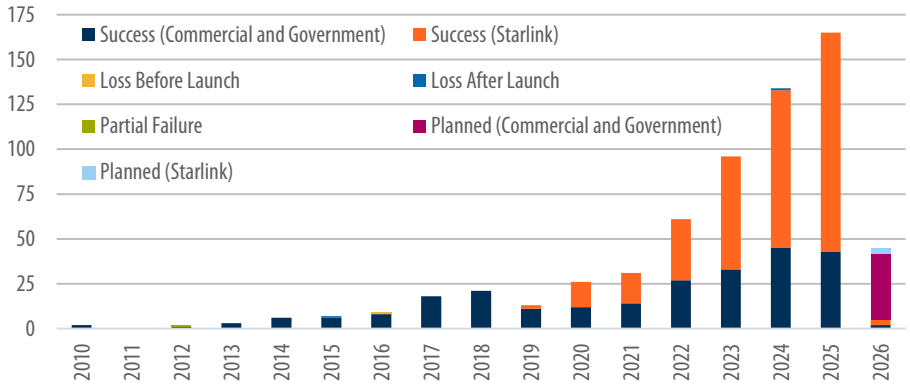
Annual Number of Objects Launched Into Space



Source: United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, First Trust Advisors. Annual data from 1957-2025. Chart includes satellites, probes, landers, crewed spacecraft, and space station flight elements launched into Earth orbit or beyond.

2025 witnessed another unprecedented boom in the space industry, once again setting a record for the number of objects launched into space. Incredibly, the total number of objects launched into orbit since 2022 exceeds the combined total from the beginning of the space exploration in 1957 through 2021. The United States has been the pioneer of this surge, largely driven by SpaceX's remarkable achievements. SpaceX now operates over 9,300 Starlink satellites in low-earth orbit as of December 2025. These satellites, a technological breakthrough, not only helped the U.S. claim 87% of all global launches in 2025 but also revolutionized global connectivity by providing affordable internet access to remote areas. In contrast, China, the second-highest contributor, accounted for only 6% of launches last year.

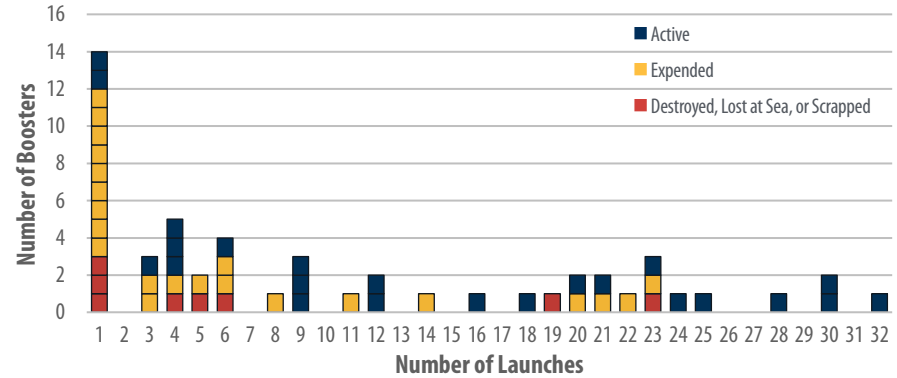
Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy Rocket Launch Outcomes



Source: SpaceX, First Trust Advisors. Annual data from 2010 – 2026.

Over the past 15 years, SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket fleet has achieved an outstanding track record, with 590 successful missions on 594 total launches—a 99.23% success rate, marred only by three failures and one partial failure. 2025 recorded the best year to date for Falcon 9 rockets, launching 165 times (averaging 1 launch every 2.2 days), with ZERO failures. While there are not many Starlink launches officially scheduled for 2026 today, last week the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) granted SpaceX approval to launch 7,500 more Starlink satellites in the near future—expected to increase the total number of Starlink satellites in orbit by 80%. As more deals like this one are finalized over the year, the number of planned Falcon 9 launches will increase, likely setting another annual launch record in 2026.

Number of Times the Same Block 5 Booster Has Been Used



Source: SpaceX, First Trust Advisors. Data through January 13, 2026.

The large reduction in the cost of space launches can be traced back to a game changing moment ten years ago, when SpaceX made history by successfully landing a rocket's first stage after launch. This achievement marked the beginning of SpaceX's ambitious push to reuse rockets, initially aiming for up to 10 flights per rocket before retirement. In December 2025, SpaceX shattered even its own expectations, setting a new record when one of its rockets completed its 32nd successful launch. SpaceX now has a fleet of 23 active Block 5 boosters (the latest version of the reusable rocket), 9 of which have completed at least 20 successful launches.