



# When Worlds Divide

“America first”, Donald Trump’s election slogan, raised hackles right round the world. How dare someone proclaim such unalloyed and uncouth self-interest in this day and age?! And how preposterous that such a cheap tactic should wind up tipping the balance in a democratically held election! Countless column inches have been filled with commentary about the supposed arrogance and detachment of elites, not to mention the hopeless ignorance of an ill-informed electorate allegedly led astray by populism. The consensus seems to be that Trump, of all people – a jumped-up parvenu, flaunting his *nouveau riche* wealth – was elected by “white trash”, the *nouveau pauvre* victims of a globalised economy; people who can barely read and write.

Moving beyond psychological profiling of the new US president, the 25th edition of *bergsicht* (May 2017) seeks to place the explicit pursuit of self-interest within its historical and social context. It is no secret that many key decisions in recent years have been driven by a belief in a kind of higher, collective “global interest” – there has been talk of a global order, even a global ethos, and many have claimed to further its values. The bestowal of the Nobel Peace Prize on the previous US president at the beginning of his first term in recognition of his purported commitment to such principles was a high water mark. Since then, support for the concept of a higher (or “meta”) interest as a pseudo-religious counterpart to globalisation has been ebbing; indeed, it is becoming ever more legitimate to assert national interests – and ultimately, plain and simple self-interest. America first, me first – what next? Putin, the Russian president, fired the starting gun on this new “business model” with his cold annexation of the Crimea in March 2014.

Thanks to modern communications technology, individuals and/or organisations can now pursue their interests unencumbered by intermediaries. The new president of the USA tweets

directly to his citizens. Press conferences – who needs them? Rendered obsolete, it is precisely these middlemen – the media, the experts, the lobbyists – who make up the elite that justifiably feel marginalised. The pursuit of interests without recourse to third parties is a megatrend that will feature ever more prominently in social, political and economic life. In other words, the new political era we are witnessing is symptomatic of a far more fundamental change, induced by technology.

Is a shift towards more conspicuous expressions of self-interest making the world less certain? Not necessarily. And even if it is, uncertainty is most definitely not increasing in direct proportion to the decline in double standards associated with “meta-interest”; not everything that was shouted from the rooftops in the name of a higher collective interest was truly compatible with this notion of moral superiority. If nothing else, baldly expressed self-interest has the advantage of honesty... But clearly, new architectures will be required to balance competing interests as we move forward, and the struggle to establish such structures is currently in full swing at both national and supranational level; the most recent referendums and elections are manifestations of this transformational process. Worlds and societies are dividing, and new equilibriums will be taking hold.

This edition of *bergsicht* concludes that it is the institutional arrangements within which power may or may not be restrained that really count, and that the US system scores well above average on this front. At the risk of being accused of oversimplification, we describe Donald Trump’s incumbency to date as a successful stress test for the constitutional democracy of the USA.