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# How democracies live: a review essay on Shadi Hamid's *The Problem of Democracy*

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Shadi Hamid's *The Problem of Democracy* is the rare book that will be of immense value to both those who agree and disagree with its argument. This essay constructively considers Hamid's arguments. It suggests that the case for democratic minimalism might be strengthened by considering the role of economic freedom as a source of democratic resilience.

## KEYWORDS

democracy, Middle East, economic freedom, socialism and capitalism, United States

## Introduction

Shadi Hamid's *The Problem of Democracy* is about how democracies live. How they “live,” and survive, depends on reaching a modest or “minimalist” goal, which is holding elections in which losers accept the results. Its intriguing argument is that Middle Eastern democracies depend on participation of Islamic parties, but not on social liberalism (individual freedoms, personal autonomy, and social progressivism). In this emphasis on what is needed to get back, it contrast with [Levitsky and Ziblatt's \(2018\)](#) emphasis on “how democracies die,” and their emphasis on threats to democracy.

The intriguing, somewhat counterintuitive, and well-reasoned argument is that scaling back liberalism increases the robustness of democracy. This less ambitious emphasis on accepting elections rather than on exporting a liberal vision of society is, in Hamid's view, what might be the key to saving democracy. Hamid is admirably successful in what it intends to do, which is to “lay out the case for democracy in the Middle East, carefully consider counterarguments in good faith, and assess costs and benefits for a new American strategy in the short, medium, and long term” (Hamid, 29).

Hamid's book opens by noting the fundamental aspect of democracy—that people accept electoral outcomes, even when they are unfavorable—is eroding in the West and that the democratic movements with the Arab Spring did not live up to their promise. In a sense, these movements for democracy in the Middle East failed. While there are debates about how much democracy is under threat, one of the fundamental questions of our time is the issue of democratic backsliding ([Bartels et al., 2023](#)). What Hamid offers is nothing short of a blueprint for American foreign policy in the Middle East, one which is based on the concept of democratic minimalism while largely abandoning—at least for the moment—the quest for liberalism. In the Middle East, this means accepting the reality of Islamic parties and fighting autocracy, though that democracy may coexist with illiberal values. In the U.S., this requires a renewed focus on accepting the peaceful turnover of power and learning, or re-learning, how to live with outcomes that we do not like.

The analytical core of the book is a novel theory of democratic minimalism. American foreign policy has been largely defined by exporting democracy, but as Hamid explains, this has also involved exporting liberalism. Democracy, as Hamid explains, is a form of government, one which is defined by majorities or pluralities peaceably rotating power. Liberalism, in contrast, refers to a specific set of values, including individual freedom, personal

autonomy, and in some instances, social progressivism, including social justice and racial equality.

This book is an excellent primer in democratic theory, political Islam, and the movements for democracy in the Middle East. There is a powerful criticism and reflection on the core tenets of political realism, one of the most significant perspectives on foreign policy, including American strategy. It also threads the needle between a realistic perspective on the limitations of democracy and a desire to see the world's only superpower—the U.S.—as a force for constructive and positive change in the world.

This is a significant approach. It's also realistic. It is easy to consider the U.S. as a “liberal democracy” while forgetting that the country was a minimalist democracy at best for most of its history. At the time of the Constitutional founding, Native Nations had no sovereign rights and Native Americans and Black people did not have rights of citizenship. A civil war and centuries contributed to minimal democracy by the 1960s.

Against this background, Hamid's book makes a strong case for thinking about the challenges of getting to even a minimal level of democracy. It is a more realistic approach to democracy, one which recognizes throughout that American democracy did not always look like the kind of institutions American policymakers seek to export around the world.

This is also a book to inform foreign policy in the Middle East. It does an excellent job in this regard. Hamid studiously avoids the crass isolationism that comes from doctrinaire realists who are all too willing to claim that American interests have little to do with democracy abroad. In short, it's a book that will be of interest to anyone interested in democracy and how to promote it, as well as for anyone interested in the unfolding history of democracy and liberalism in the Middle East.

What follows is not a critique. It is a reflection about the nature of the claims and some ways that the argument might become even more compelling and convincing. After reviewing Hamid's case for democratic minimalism, I suggest that there are two issues to consider. One is that more consideration of the limitations of even minimalist democracy could improve the argument. The second is that economic liberalism can be a complement to democracy promotion even if one accepts that social liberalism should be removed from efforts to promote democracy around the world.

## Hamid's case for democratic minimalism

This book is, in a sense, a revisionist account that suggests a return to earlier, less ambitious notions of democracy. Hamid begins by noting that the essence of democracy is that citizens accept electoral outcomes, even if they are unfavorable. However, this fundamental aspect of democracy is increasingly absent in the U.S., where a growing number of Americans seem unwilling to respect democratic processes that do not align with their beliefs. The so-called insurrection on January 6th, 2021, is often to support this contention that people are starting to question, and even reject, this minimal criteria for democracy. But as Hamid explains, this is a crisis of democratic culture. People no longer seem to believe in the creedal value that we must accept outcomes that we find intolerable,

particularly when these outcomes threaten core values such as human rights, social justice, and minority protections.

What exactly is democratic minimalism? It is essentially democracy without liberalism, but also a narrow notion of democracy. The essence of democracy is a system of government in which the preference of majorities or pluralities determine policy through regular elections and the rotation of power. Liberalism, to distinguish it from democracy, prioritizes individual freedoms, personal autonomy, and social progressivism—human rights, democracy, and racial equality. The dilemma of democracy is that elections seem to increasingly produce what seems to be destructive outcomes that put lives and livelihoods at risk. As Hamid puts it, democracy is a form of government, while liberalism is a form of governing.

A theme is that one of the challenges with American foreign policy is coming to grips with Islamic parties in the Middle East. The idea is that it is important to see these parties as democratic, even though they are not liberal. Rather than see democracy as incompatible with Islam, there is an effort to continue to push against autocracy, but that requires accepting the reality of Islamic parties. This emphasis on continued engagement differs from some realist accounts which suggest more of an isolationist response from the U.S. There's no isolationism here. It's critical of realist view that morality is to each, their own. It's more like neorealism, with its emphasis on U.S. interests that are defined to include promoting “good” institutions, though to do this, it is necessary to limit what is sought.

There is a profound sense of purpose in the book. Liberalism is not the way, because Islamist parties are not liberal. The more important challenges are despotism and autocracy. As Hamid notes, the overarching goal is to “help make repressive regimes less repressive. This is what might be called anti-despotism. The second is to proactively promote democracy.” (Hamid, 165). Later in the book, Hamid puts it this way: “the guiding principle is to not accept ‘reality’ as a given and to instead write about what can and should happen” (203).

The book ends with a vision. Rather than moral relativism, there is an appeal to the greater good and, ultimately, to the reasonableness of institutions: “In this sense, contra Machiavelli, power and morality are inextricably intertwined. The legitimacy of a U.S.-led order depends on the notion that it is better than the alternative, and it is better because morality plays some role in American foreign policy in a way that it does not for revisionist powers like China or Russia. Or to put it somewhat differently, it is in our national interest to be moral” (250).

## Democracy, for and against

The case for minimalist democracy is a strong one. It recognizes the limitations of foreign policy, as well as acknowledging that there are significant differences in how democracies function. But there is also something missing. Although Hamid recognizes that there are other features of democracy besides peaceful turnover of power, most of the emphasis is on that specific feature. And in the case of the U.S., this leaves a lot out.

One can start with the Constitution. The Framers of the Constitution did not call the political system a democracy, but rather, a republican form of government. That is significant because it was not just about elections, but about representative government.

But that is not the only thing. The framers placed tremendous emphasis on federalism and separation of powers. As political theorist [Ostrom \(1994\)](#) emphasizes, it was federalism that provided for self-governance by providing for autonomy of the states and by extension communities to govern their own affairs. It was not so much democracy that was the mechanism to address the creedal conflicts, but a federation and a national government of enumerated powers.

Separation of powers was also a defining feature that operates beyond elections. Rather than a centralized government with power in the legislature or president, the American system divides authority so much that any major policies generally depend for support on Congress, the President, and the Supreme Court. For amendments to the Constitution, the state legislatures (or a supermajority) must agree to the change.

There are also substantive provisions, such as the commerce clause. As [Mittal et al. \(2011\)](#) argue, the commerce clause was central to the creation of a national market, and many of the provisions of the Constitution are designed to establish a market-preserving federal system. This idea of a market-preserving federation is significant because it shifts the emphasis from elections to markets as a source of peace and political order ([Weingast, 1995](#)). While many countries have elections, what separates the U.S. is its limited government and its emphasis on political institutions as critical to ensuring the emergence of a market. From this perspective, what makes the U.S. special is separation of powers, federalism, and the commerce clause. Hence, one might question promoting democracy, since that is not what make the U.S. a rich and powerful nation.

There's also the question of institutional design. One of the challenges of democracy promotion is that in divided societies, the design of democratic institutions is especially significant. There is a presumption that elections can often lead to violence. The problem is one of designing the "right" institutions, not just about elections.

The relationship between socialism and democracy is complicated, as is how we define "socialism." With that proviso in mind, it is reasonable to consider whether economic liberalism contributes to more robust democracy. Examples from sub-Saharan Africa are at least suggestive of how socialism might undermine democracy. Both South Africa and Zimbabwe realized these challenges when elections brought populist governments. Classical liberal economist W.H. Hutt, speaking on South Africa, argued that the problem with democracy is that "one person, one vote" without constraints on what populist government could do might do more harm than good ([Magnus et al., 2021](#)). In South Africa, expropriation of white people's property was a consequence, an expected response to decades of white dominance. For this reason, Hutt proposed some limitations on democratic majorities.

Each of the examples above might be considered Cold War relics, but from a big picture perspective, each is suggestive that without economic liberalism, political democracy might suffer. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe chose socialism, and like Venezuela, which will be discussed later, democracy soon transcended into autocracy. One could also consider Afghanistan, which despite two decades of state-building, succumbed to the Taliban in 2021. Afghanistan had several rounds of elections. It was a minimal democracy, but that did not do enough to prevent the Taliban from coming to power.

This reasoning suggests that promoting a minimal democracy is not necessarily going to contribute to peace and prosperity. The lesson of the U.S. is probably one about limited government and economic

freedom as a source of prosperity, as well as that those political features are reinforced by economic freedom.

One response might be that the countries above were not entirely socialist, or that they are not from the Middle East. To be sure, one example from the Middle East that suggests socialism might be consistent with democracy is Israel, which started out as a socialist country, with its emphasis on state ownership alongside kibbutz ([Abramitzky, 2018](#)). Israel's reputation as a start-up nation ([Senor and Singer, 2011](#)), which is strongly capitalist, suggests that socialism does not doom democracy, and to the extent some of that is retained, that it might even make for a more robust democracy. The Middle Eastern democracies with oil also have a significant scope of state ownership, especially over oil, and so that suggests those "socialist" aspects might not be especially a threat to democracy. Minimally, they suggest that socialism does not necessarily make or break democracy.

There is also a more theoretical issue, one emphasized by public choice economics. Nobelist in economics [Buchanan \(1984\)](#) described public choice as "politics without romance" because of its realistic view that politicians respond to institutional incentives and those incentives do not often align with the "public good." Rather than promote elections, public choice has long been concerned with tyranny of the majority. Public choice is not anti-democratic. Rather, it recognizes that democracy can be subject to majority tyranny. To protect individuals, Buchanan and his colleague Gordon Tullock used a thought experiment about consensus to think about how ensuring individual rights and liberties would be respected in a democracy ([Buchanan and Tullock, 1962](#)).

Consensus is not going to be achieved, however, because it would be too time consuming, so the calculus of consent should not be read as a blueprint for democratic policymaking. But the implication is that we should see democracy as an end if we are concerned about respect for minority rights. Political theorists [Brennan \(2017\)](#) offers a related idea in thinking about how consideration of political knowledge might be a way to improve democracy. Like public choice perspectives, Brennan's insight is to see democracy is not in itself a perfect system and is often quite imperfect.

Not all public choice is critical of democracy. [Caplan \(2006\)](#) argues that democracy works well in the sense it allows people to be "rationally irrational." By that, Caplan means that people have irrational beliefs but they like holding on to them, and democracy is a way for them to feel good about acting on those beliefs. It's rational to keep these beliefs since changing them is costly, including to one's psyche.

All of this is to say that Hamid's democratic minimalism probably overstates the good that comes from elections, and even from accepting these bad outcomes. The idea of public choice, and the experience of countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela, is that some of these outcomes are a real problem. In Afghanistan, we also see that having minimal democracy does not necessarily prevent insurgents and terrorists from coming back to power. And each of these cases considered suggest that we ought to focus on protection of individual rights, and in some cases, be especially concerned about elections of socialists since that appears to be what is ultimately undermining democracy in Venezuela.

This suggests that even if one accepts the idea of not promoting a liberal vision, and focusing on elections, it might not get the good outcomes one wants. If this is true, then the emphasis on promoting

even a minimal version of democracy might not be in the interest of the U.S., or the people in the countries receiving the nudge.

## Liberalism, political and economic

In the sense introduced above, and used in *The Problem of Democracy*, liberalism is a political perspective. It's not how economists typically think about liberalism, which has more to do with economic freedom. Though economic freedom can mean many things, the usual emphasis is on private property rights, competitive markets, and openness of labor markets and borders that allow for the flow of trade, people, and capital. Since technology is such an important part of economies and production, it could also include the freedom to choose technologies, including automation, which we know disrupts labor markets.

This differs from thinking about liberalism in the sense of individualism and socially progressive ideas. It matters because economic freedom relates to political freedom and democracy. The great economic liberals F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman articulated the virtues of markets and the problems that arise from central planning of the economy. They also had a significant political theory. The Hayek-Friedman hypothesis is that socialism, conceptualized mainly as state ownership of the economy, is what gives rise to autocracy (Reinarts et al., 2024). This is a significant theory because it suggests that autocracy and state ownership are intertwined. It also suggests that democracy and economic freedom are natural allies.

The same caveats mentioned earlier apply here – that much of this argument is based on regimes of the past, and hence might not be as relevant for current questions about democracy. Still, historians of the Soviet Union offer evidence that the most damning form of political centralization—totalitarianism—is a consequence of state ownership of the economy (Boettke, 1990; Gregory, 2004). There are, unfortunately, more examples of this several decades after the fall of the Soviet Union. In July of 2024, it seemed as if the socialists were finally voted out of Venezuela. Their state ownership transformed Venezuela from one of the wealthier countries in South America to one of the poorest in a few decades. The outright fraud in the election, and the failure of the socialists to give up control after (by most accounts) losing the election, suggests that Hayek and Friedman are correct: democratic reversals may be a consequence of state ownership of the economy. Though Venezuela's socialism is not the more pure type as one sees in, say, Cuba, it is at least suggestive that socialism might present some challenges to a minimal democracy.

Of course, not everyone agrees with Hayek and Friedman. Nobel-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz's *The Road to Freedom* (2024) contends that the problem is “neoliberalism” and those who articulated this vision, including Hayek and Friedman. The *New York Times* infamously referred to Venezuela's problem as “brutal capitalism” despite decades of rule by socialists like Nicolás Maduro whose main economic policy was to nationalize industries (Kurmanav et al., 2024).

Returning to Hutt, the solution to these problems might be more markets. Markets are what allow people live and work together, and what can overcome biases (Magnes et al., Forthcoming). It was markets that he thought would erode the biases of division in South Africa. It's worth considering this to promote living with difference and might also be a way to promote countries working together.

What does this mean for democratic minimalism? If the above perspectives on autocracy and economic freedom are correct, the way to promote democracy is not just by pushing for elections, but by promoting a specific kind of liberalism—economically free markets. The reason is that economic freedom might be necessary for a lasting democratic order.

Of course, promoting markets is challenging. As classical liberal economists have long understood, markets are not really planned. Once they emerge, what governments can do is strengthen them. A legal foundation is necessary for a fully functional economy. But what must occur is people are able to come together and trade. The rest of the problem is recognizing that the market is something that ought to be strengthened.

Still, there is evidence that markets can be promoted. The Washington Consensus emerged to include promotion of economic freedom. In its initial versions, it was more about policy—sound money and balanced budgets. Over time, what became clear is that economic freedom and improvements in political institutions were necessary. Some of the best empirical work shows that countries that adopted the Washington Consensus policies did better (Grier and Grier, 2021). It is not clear that these good fortunes were because of foreign policy, but it suggests that one way to promote democracy might be to foster “good” economic reforms, including both policy and institutional reforms.

Since Hamid's book is focused on the Middle East, these ideas can be linked to Timur Kuran's insights into the region. Kuran's insights are into economics in Islamic countries. One insight is that there's only economics, not “Islamic economics” (Kuran, 2004). But there is much more. In *The Long Divergence*, Kuran (2011) explains how Islamic institutions undermined economic development in the Middle East. To the extent that is the case, what might be a challenge is that liberal economic institutions in the West had about a 500 year lead on developing the kinds of institutions that would appear intimately related to support for democracy.

Democratic minimalism, in other words, might need some liberalism, but not the political liberalism that makes it challenging to accept Islamic parties. The question is whether Islamic parties can coexist with economic freedom. To the extent that Islamic constraints on capitalism have eroded—Kuran shows that they have, for the most part—it may be possible to promote both a minimal form of democracy and to promote economic freedom, without pushing for the progressive social policies that are more challenging to align with the values of Islamic parties.

Of course, all of the above is more of a question for subsequent studies of democracy. The history of socialism in the Middle East is itself complex. There are many countries that were closer to socialism, and some retain more of those features today, including in some sectors, such as oil, though even in those cases, there is reliance on capitalist markets to sell oil. One might also conclude that if Kuran is correct, many of the Arab democracies have already overcome some of the challenges posed by Islamic institutions and are sufficiently liberal in that regard (even if they do not meet Hamid's criteria for social liberalism). But even if one contends that the Middle Eastern democracies have become more liberal, then that would reinforce the ideas above, which is that more economic liberalism is ultimately important, and perhaps a precondition, for more robust democracy. In that case, a reasonable view is that the changes to the Islamic economic system that

become more liberal were important to emergence of minimalist democracy in the Middle East, which would complement Hamid's point in suggesting that it's not social liberalism that is necessary, but elections and some economic reform that move toward economic liberalism.

## The wisdom of doing less

Hamid is both an author and prolific host of the podcast *Wisdom of Crowds*, which freely dispenses wisdom as does this book. It is not just knowledge of the ideas and facts of democracy, but a narrative that relies on talking with people and from living in the places he's talking about.

The wisdom comes in many forms, but one of the most significant might be in seeing that some of the traditional ideas about democracy may be the key to a brighter future. This book urges caution in micromanaging the process of political development. In that regard, it's reminiscent of Hayek's critique of planning. Just as you cannot plan an economy, it's challenging to plan democracy. How democracy emerges, what it looks like, and how it lives is, to an extent, unpredictable: what seems like it might not work turns out to work.

Just as many Western economists may not have believed that China could see decades of economic growth while maintaining single-party rule and state ownership over land, many political theorists might not have seen Islamic parties as democratic. But they can be, and, in many cases, are.

Ultimately, one might come from this book as seeing it more about promoting self-governance. It's a critique of micromanaging the process of political development. A liberal society cannot be planned, but there are ways to promote some things that are good, including good economic institutions that reinforce or even make possible minimal democracy.

One can also see in this book a deeper form of realism. The realism comes through with statements such as this: "Arab democracy is simply impossible without the inclusion of Islamist parties. I hesitate to state this as if it might be controversial when it is one of the few notions in Middle East politics that is close to self-evident" (113). But it's not crass realism that makes the move to assuming nothing can be done in the Middle East, and it is not the libertarian isolationism that often comes with knowledge-based criticisms of U.S. foreign policy. That has been described as the fatal conceit of foreign policy, an idea that suggests that we end up doing worse (Coyne, 2013). The

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libertarian position is a compelling one, but often leaves out that something *can* and *should* be done. And this book shows how it can be done with minimal risk.

And that leaves us with something of a conundrum. If democracy is as public choice says it is—a deeply flawed system—then how we can we ensure American policymakers will do what makes the most sense, given that they make decisions in a democracy? The metapolitical problem still needs to be resolved. And that too is what public choice suggests, which is that if we cannot rely on democracies to do good, why should we go around promoting anything? That contention is something that Hamid's book acknowledges, which is that ultimately, democracy depends on the people in the countries seeking to improve their political system.

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