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# Editorial: Review symposium: the problem of democracy

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Review symposium: the problem of democracy

## From liberal democracy to democratic minimalism

This symposium brings together seven scholarly responses to Shadi Hamid's exceptional recent book, *The Problem of Democracy* (Hamid, 2022). Hamid develops the concept of “democratic minimalism,” which he defines in contrast to the liberal vision often associated with democracy as a system of regular elections in which outcomes are respected and power changes peacefully. Liberal values—such as individual rights, secularism, and gender equality—are not, in his view, essential components of democracy. Drawing on an abundance of evidence from the Middle East, Hamid argues that conflating liberalism with democracy has undermined U.S. foreign policy, especially when Islamist parties with broad public support are excluded or delegitimized for their illiberal views. Rather, the U.S. is better served by a “democracy-first” approach. This prioritizes electoral legitimacy over liberal outcomes, even if this means accepting governments that may restrict certain freedoms. The interest of the U.S., as Hamid persuasively argues, is to instead press allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to hold genuine elections and accept the results—even if illiberal actors win—so long as democratic procedures are followed. This rethinking of democracy's minimal core raises challenging and timely questions about whether the U.S. is prepared to support elected governments that do not share liberal values but adhere to democratic norms.

## Debating the merits and risks of minimalist democracy

The contributors to this symposium engage with Hamid's thesis from a variety of angles, often highlighting points of tension or disagreement. A central debate revolves around whether democracy can truly be separated from liberalism without jeopardizing democratic stability. Several authors caution that completely decoupling liberal norms might undermine democracy in the long run. Sam Mace contends that Hamid's minimalist formula is inherently fragile. In Mace's analysis, a democracy that limits itself to electoral procedures while neglecting liberal protections can open the door for illiberal elected

leaders to erode democracy from within. Citing contemporary Hungary as an example of a democracy that retained formal elections but suffered severe backsliding, Mace argues that procedural minimalism is “too thin” a foundation—without a thicker bedrock of liberal institutions or civic norms, democracy may not be self-sustaining. Omar Sadr offers a related critique: rather than abandoning liberalism, Sadr believes democracies should adopt a pluralistic approach that accommodates a range of cultural and religious values. He suggests that Hamid’s vision paints liberalism, secularism, and Islamism with too broad a brush. By developing a democratic pluralism that allows for diversity and dialogue (instead of a strict minimalist bargain of democracy in exchange for illiberal governance), Sadr argues it’s possible to reconcile Islamic political movements with certain liberal principles over time. Both Mace and Sadr, in different ways, raise the concern that a democracy needs more than just ballots and acceptance of results—it also requires either normative guardrails or a pluralistic openness to truly thrive.

Other contributors focus on what democratic minimalism might overlook in terms of public expectations and effective governance. Salih Yasun points out that many citizens, especially in Arab countries, judge democracy by its ability to deliver tangible benefits like jobs and economic growth. If a minimalist democracy does not improve people’s lives, Yasun warns, it could quickly lose legitimacy. In his analysis of survey data, a recurring theme is that “democracy with adjectives”—democracy coupled with social goods like economic development—is what people often desire. Hamid’s minimalism deliberately sets aside these performance expectations, but Yasun’s findings suggest that this separation may be hard to sustain politically: voters might not remain content with procedural democracy alone if it doesn’t meet their needs, leading to disenchantment or a turn back toward authoritarian “deliverers.” Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili similarly argues that Hamid’s blueprint is incomplete, but from an institutional angle. Drawing on the state-building experience in Afghanistan, she observes that simply holding elections (a minimalist democracy) did little to produce a stable or accountable government there. The missing ingredient, she contends, was good governance—effective institutions, rule of law, and inclusion of local self-governance. Thus, both Yasun and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili highlight that real-world democracies are judged by more than just their electoral process: economic outcomes and governance quality are critical to their success or failure.

## Democracy, liberalism, and U.S. foreign policy—points of divergence

Hamid’s call for a “democracy-first” U.S. foreign policy—embracing electoral legitimacy even when outcomes are illiberal—receives careful scrutiny. John J. Chin is skeptical of such a pivot and challenges three core assumptions. First, he questions whether the divergence between democracy and liberalism is as sharp or consequential as Hamid claims, noting that even illiberal democracies need basic rights protections. Second, he doubts Hamid’s portrayal of Arab autocracies as inherently brittle, warning that sudden democratization could

lead to instability. Third, Chin critiques the suggested trade-off between supporting Arab democracy and maintaining Arab–Israeli peace, arguing that abandoning the long-standing “stability-first” approach could have unintended consequences. In contrast, Haroun Rahimi engages Hamid from a historical and philosophical angle. He agrees that efforts to impose liberalism in Muslim-majority societies have often failed but argues Hamid does not go far enough. Rahimi suggests rethinking the nation-state model itself, drawing on pre-modern Islamic governance traditions that allowed local communities autonomy. This approach, he argues, could reduce conflict between secularists and Islamists by enabling democratic pluralism within decentralized systems—an alternative Hamid’s framework largely overlooks.

Throughout these discussions, the tone of the symposium remains analytical and constructive. Ilia Murtazashvili, for example, while generally positive about Hamid’s contributions, points out that incorporating economic liberty, especially market freedoms, might further reinforce democratic resilience (Ilia Murtazashvili). In doing so, he echoes a common theme among the contributors: that democracy’s survival may depend on factors beyond the minimal procedural elements. Whether it is liberal values, pluralistic accommodation, economic performance, strong governance, or innovative constitutional frameworks, each author identifies something additional that democratic minimalism must consider or contend with.

## Conclusion

Hamid’s *The Problem of Democracy* succeeds in provoking the kind of debate urgently needed about the relationship between democracy and liberalism. His argument for democratic minimalism—prioritizing electoral legitimacy over liberal outcomes—raises pressing questions that scholars and policymakers will continue to grapple with. Is minimalist democracy a stable political order or a regime continually on the brink of autocracy? Should the promotion of democracy still include concern for liberal values and not just state capacity? How well can U.S. foreign policy navigate the tension between its ideals and its strategic interests? These questions are especially salient amid the evolving trajectory of the Abraham Accords, the 12-day war with Iran in the summer of 2025, and continuing uncertainty over what kind of democracy, if any, might emerge in Gaza. By disentangling democracy from liberalism, Hamid forces a reexamination of assumptions that have long shaped U.S. engagement abroad. The provocative and uncomfortable ideas in this book are part of an ongoing conversation about the future of democracy in an illiberal age.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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