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### July 20, 2011: This Proposed Constitutional Amendment Shows Contempt for Democracy

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Title: This Proposed Constitutional Amendment Shows Contempt for Democracy

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7/20/2011—I have always been a deficit hawk. It has always seemed to me that stable economics requires generally that no deficits be run without particular cause. Of course, the irony is that only the Democrats have recently run surpluses, not Republicans, who turned surpluses into deficits, partly through an intentional policy of “starving the beast” through unwise tax cuts during the Bush Administration. So, I look with some fondness on the House proposal of a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. I worry that it does not allow for counter cyclical deficits, but that could have worked out. You do sometimes want to run deficits. But a constitutional amendment is not supposed to decide a basic policy that should be for the people of every generation to vote on democratically. This amendment proposes a cap on government spending of about 18%. It’s not just that the cap is too low—we spend 24% of GNP now and were spending more than 18% before the recession. The problem is that if democracy is to mean anything, it should mean that the people decide in every age what kind of political and economic arrangements they want to have. If they want to have single payer health care, for example, like most other countries, versus the current system, that would obviously require more than 18% spending. But just as everyone would agree that the kind of healthcare system we have should be a democratic decision, the general level of spending should be too. Perhaps one day, the people of the United States will decide they want to have a basically socialist system. All the current Constitution says is that expropriations would have to be paid for. The Constitution does not endorse capitalism. That is how matters should stay. Amendments to the Constitution require supermajorities to pass, so they look democratic. But they are not. They are meant to remove certain matters from democratic debate. So they are always undemocratic in that sense. For certain matters—fundamental rights, for example—we want to take away the power of the majority. But if we press a constitutional amendment simply because we fear that we won’t be able to convince a majority of voters of our policy preferences in the future, then we are abusing the amendment process and showing contempt for democracy.