supermajority of two-thirds of Congress or any increase in the national debt without a supermajority of three-fifths.

The immediate explanation for the amendment may seem obvious. Republicans in Congress want to please their party’s base. But why is the base so interested in putting government in a straitjacket? A party that sees itself as likely to win future elections is generally not interested in limiting its own powers. But according to Ran Hirschl, a legal scholar in the field of comparative law, parties expecting their fortunes to decline often attempt to entrench their views in constitutional provisions while they have the power to do so. Hirschl calls this pattern “hegemonic preservation,” and the Republican Party’s eagerness to amend the Constitution is a perfect example.

Republicans know in their gut that theirs is a demographically declining party. The GOP does poorly among younger voters, and it has little appeal to ethnic minorities who represent a rising share of the population. The native-born whites at the party’s base worry that they are losing control of American society, and they see themselves as the source of the nation’s wealth and values, besieged by claimants on the public treasury who steal their money through taxes. Looking in low taxes through the Constitution would offer them protection even after they can no longer dominate elections.

The Constitution did not omit limits on taxes and borrowing because of an oversight. Under the Articles of Confederation, the federal government had been paralyzed because of its inability to raise revenue, and one of the chief purposes of the Constitution was to give the government the fiscal powers it had previously been denied. During the ratification debate, those fiscal powers were at the heart of the Anti-Federalist case against the Constitution—to which Hamilton responded, in “Federalist No. 30,” that limiting those powers would be unwise because there was no telling what demands the government might face in the future.

Hamilton was right. The nation would never have flourished if the Anti-Federalists had gotten their way. Now the Republicans—true heirs to the Anti-Federalists—are trying to entrench the kind of arbitrary fiscal limitations and requirements for congressional supermajorities that the Founders rejected.

Supermajority requirements empower minorities. If you like the filibuster, you’ll love the provision of the balanced-budget amendment that would enable just one-third of either house of Congress to block an increase in taxes. No doubt the amendment’s backers see it as a barrier to liberal programs. But one day when they favor an increase in, say, defense spending, the amendment could well blow up in their faces and budgetary conventions that determine, for example, what counts as “on” or “off” budget?

The amendment does not make sense, however, as the effort of a party desperate to lock in its views while it can. A big