



How did pocket Constitutions become bestsellers?

In the wake of the Democratic National Convention, sales of pocket versions of the United States Constitution have skyrocketed.

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A surprising new bestseller is vying with the latest installment in the "Harry Potter" pantheon, "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child," for top billing on sales lists after the Democratic National Convention this weekend.

After Khizr Khan, the father of deceased US soldier Army Captain Humayun Khan, a Muslim-American, spoke at the Democratic National Convention while brandishing his own pocket copy of the US Constitution, sales of tiny Constitutions have gone through the roof.

"As long as people are going back to our founding documents and trying to understand what our American experiment is all about, that's what's important," National Center for Constitutional Studies spokesman Dan Sheridan told the the Wall Street Journal. "The constitution is about individual liberty. It's about protecting us regardless of our race, regardless of our creed. And it unites us. That's a struggle that is current, just as Harry Potter is current."

Yet although the Democratic party may, for now, own the image of patriotic Americans brandishing the Constitution, pocket Constitutions have a strong bipartisan history.

First printed in 1965, the pint sized documents first became popular following the 1972 Watergate scandal, according to Slate. After that scandal undermined America's trust in government, many officials used pocket constitutions as visual aids to connote patriotism.

For example, the chair of the Senate Select Committee to Investigate Campaign Practices, Sen. Sam Ervin (D) of North Carolina, made a habit of pulling out his pocket Constitution during Watergate committee hearings.

In the 1990s, Sen. Robert Byrd (D) of West Virginia was one of the most visible pocket Constitution carriers. During the Senate debates on line-item veto power, Senator Byrd was outspoken in his belief that the writers of the Constitution would never have supported giving the

president that power. Later, after the US Supreme Court struck down the line-item veto, Byrd praised the court for its adherence to the Constitution.

“I pulled out of my shirt pocket my dog-eared copy of the Constitution, noting that the Founding Fathers never would have approved such a proposal,” wrote Byrd in his autobiography.

“Congress, I said, had been seized by a ‘collective madness.’ A power-hungry president would be able to punish a senator and his constituents, I cautioned.”

In 2007, Democratic presidential candidate Dennis Kucinich was invited as a guest on the political satire show "The Colbert Report" to empty his pockets after he had produced a pocket Constitution during a presidential debate to drive home a point.

The Constitution enjoys similar support from the other side of the aisle, where Republicans, and in recent years, many tea party supporters, have praised the Founding Fathers’ clarity of vision.

Yet a shared interest in constitutional principles does not mean consensus on the way the document should be interpreted. Famous conservative textualists such as the late Antonin Scalia have argued that "[it] is the law that governs, not the intent of the lawgiver," in his words. Others argue that it is the intent of the Constitution that matters.

Despite periodic swells of interest in the Constitution, however, many Americans still falter when asked to describe what is stated in the document. In 2006, a McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum study found that while 22 percent of Americans could name all five Simpsons family members, just 1 in 1000 people could name all five First Amendment freedoms.

More recently, in 2014, the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center found that just 36 percent of Americans could name all three branches of the US Government. Even more shockingly, 35 percent could only name one.

Pocket Constitutions themselves are published and distributed by a number of groups. The liberal American Civil Liberties Union is distributing its copy, which it normally sells for \$5, for free to interested customers until election day. The Cato Institute, a libertarian group, sells its version for about the same price, and the conservative Heritage Foundation also prints a copy.