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What's in your pocket? Some fans think everyone should carry a copy of the U.S. Constitution.

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Illustration for Constitution story. (Pioneer Press: Chris Polydoroff)

The Constitution is never far from Chuck Samuelson's heart.

The executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota always carries a pocket copy of the document in the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

He's not alone. Lawyers, judges, law school professors, lawmakers, think tank sages and even a few journalists all find the Constitution such an essential touchstone in day-to-day life that they never leave home without it.

In fact, many Constitution fans say everyone can and should carry around a copy of the nation's operating manual.

Much as the Gideons say every hotel room should have a Bible, organizations of all political stripes say a copy of the Constitution belongs in the pocket of every right-thinking citizen, especially today.

It's Constitution Day, the anniversary of the 1787 signing of the supreme law of the land.

Pocket versions of the document have been printed and distributed by the millions — often for free — by groups ranging from the ACLU on the left, to the Heritage Foundation on the right, to the libertarian friendly Cato Institute.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services publishes a pocket Constitution for immigrants studying to be naturalized citizens.

Thousands of new law students across the country get a pocket version printed by the Minnesota-based publishing company West, a Thompson Reuters business. West hands them out at gay pride festivals and tucked them in delegate welcome packets at last year's Republican National Convention.

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Samuelson said a document that starts with "We the People" belongs in the hands of the people. The ACLU of Minnesota gives away about 10,000 free pocket copies a year, handing them out at the State Fair and sending them to anyone who calls.

"We've shipped them all over the country," he said. "We don't even charge for postage."

"If you're going to be a citizen of this nation, gee, shouldn't you have the Constitution? It's an important document," said Chuck Silverman, president of Johnson Printing and Packaging Corp., the Fridley company that prints the ACLU pocket Constitution for free.

"Eventually, I think, everyone should have one of these things," Samuelson said. "I don't think anyone could object to it."

Do they object?

"Of course," Samuelson said. "Because it says ACLU on the front. I tell them, 'Rip the cover off and stick it in your pocket if it's bothering you that much.'"

"The Constitution is for everyone to interpret," said Craig Westover, a contributing columnist to the Pioneer Press and a senior policy fellow at the Minnesota Free Market Institute.

He is seldom without his pocket version printed by the Cato Institute.

"It's like forgetting your wallet or your sunglasses," he said. "I've carried one for decades."

He finds himself dipping into it while sitting in the doctor's waiting room or standing at the bus stop.

"It's a fascinating document," he said. "It's so small, it fits in your pocket, and yet it's run the country for

200 years."

It's also handy to pull out to settle a dispute, set the record straight or score a point.

In an era when "Read the bill!" has become a rallying cry in the health care debate, what better trump card can you brandish than a copy of the Constitution, perhaps with a challenge like, "Show me in here where the federal government is authorized to regulate the delivery of health care?"

"Where's the 'cash for clunkers' clause? I don't see it in the Constitution," Westover said.

"I've pulled it out at cocktail parties, and I've pulled it out at picnics," he said. "I will if my wife isn't around. She'll get mad if I'm that guy."

State Sen. David Hann, a Republican from Eden Prairie, said he produced his pocket copy when he encountered a Ron Paul supporter who said the right to secede was in the Constitution.

"I said, 'Baloney. Show me where it says that,' " Hann said. "It's amazing how many times you have occasion to refer to it."

"I always have a few in my briefcase and have, on several occasions while riding the Metro in the D.C. area, overheard a conversation about whether or not something is constitutional, and have handed one over, for free, to one of the people conversing," said Robert Garber, marketing director for the Cato Institute. "It never ceases to garner a terrific reception."

Different versions of the pocket Constitution have extra features. The one distributed by the Minnesota ACLU includes a copy of the Minnesota Constitution.

"Do you know you have a constitutional right to fish

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as long as you obey the state law?" Samuelson asked.

The Heritage Foundation version includes the Declaration of Independence. The National Constitution Center, a Philadelphia museum, gives out a version printed on a single 9-by-22 inch sheet of paper.

It folds to a 3-by-3 inch square so small you can tuck it into your wallet. The Cato Institute has versions in Spanish and Arabic.

Cato Institute officials say they've distributed about 3.5 million pocket Constitutions. They have been seen in the hands of everyone from Peter Jennings to Trent Lott to troops in Iraq.

In the 1980s, then-Chief Justice Warren Burger was interested in having people know more about the Constitution. He asked West to make a pocket version, said Scott Augustin, communications director for Thomson Reuters.

"We did and gave a quantity to the justice, which his office distributed, and we began distributing them as well," Augustin said.

That's a good thing, said Steve Frank, vice president for education and exhibits at the National Constitution Center. The Constitution is brief, written in plain language and intended to be read and understood by the people, Frank said.

"The Constitution belongs to the American people. It's not the private possession of judges," he said.

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FYI

The University of Minnesota Law School will host a

Constitution Day program at 12:15 p.m. today in Room 25 of Mondale Hall, 229 19th Ave. S. Minneapolis.

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