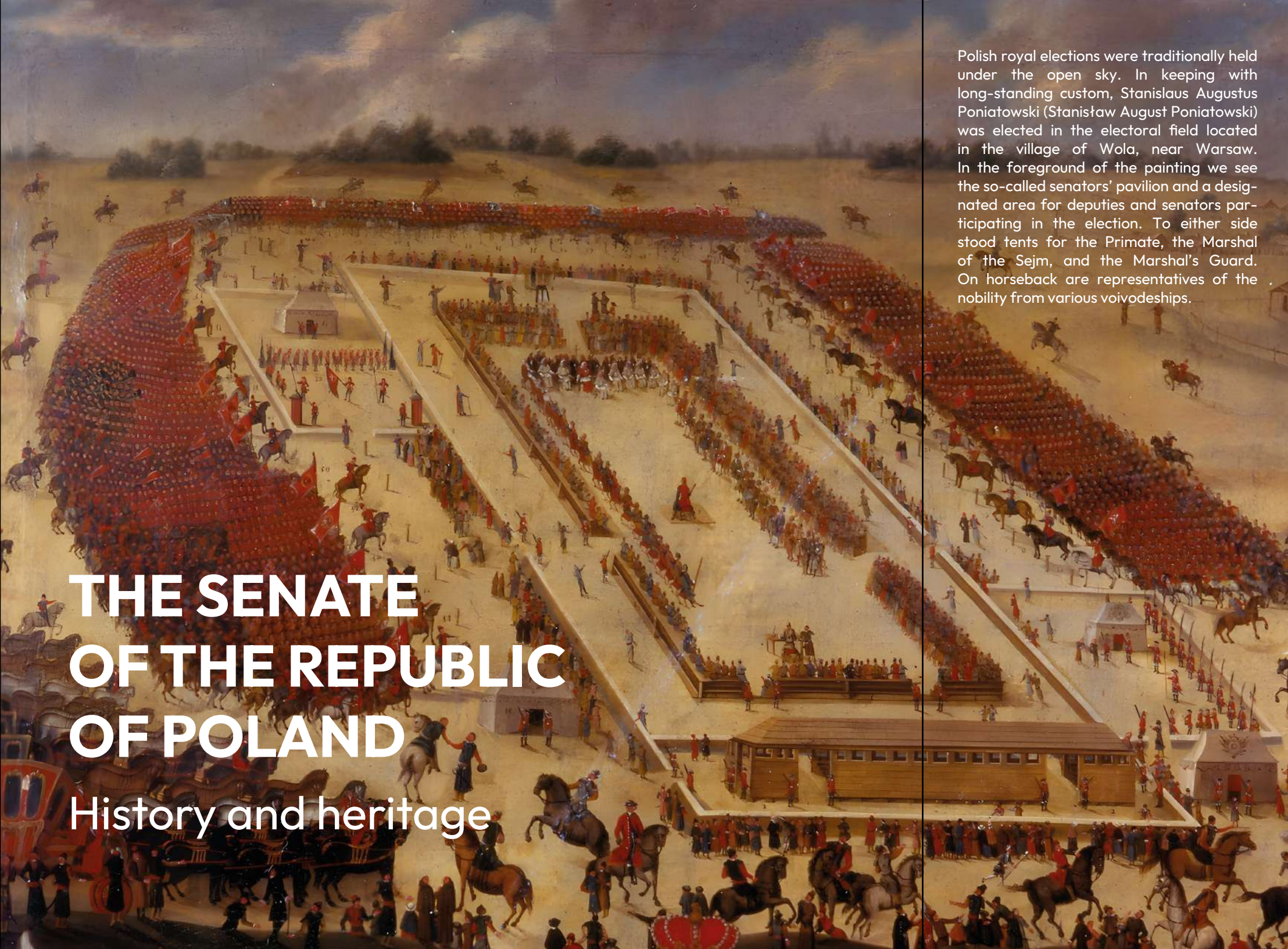




THE SENATE OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

History and heritage

Polish royal elections were traditionally held under the open sky. In keeping with long-standing custom, Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski (Stanisław August Poniatowski) was elected in the electoral field located in the village of Wola, near Warsaw. In the foreground of the painting we see the so-called senators' pavilion and a designated area for deputies and senators participating in the election. To either side stood tents for the Primate, the Marshal of the Sejm, and the Marshal's Guard. On horseback are representatives of the nobility from various voivodeships.



Map of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, engraved by Georges Louis Le Rouge, 1748



KANCELARIA
SENATU

Jarosław Maciej Zawadzki

THE SENATE OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND

History and heritage

Chancellery of the Senate
Warsaw 2025

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The Senate in the Old Polish Era

Throughout history, monarchs ruling the state were always surrounded by trusted collaborators and a close circle of advisers. According to the chronicle of the Anonymous known as Gallus, 'Boleslaus I the Brave (Bolesław I Chrobry) had twelve advisers, with whom he maintained friendship and feasted.'¹ From the mid-14th century onwards, such individuals formed the royal council at the courts of successive Polish rulers. In the Old Polish period, this body was known as the *panowie rada* (lords of the council). Its composition was not fixed. The king alone decided whom he trusted and whose advice he would heed. When inviting someone—usually a magnate—into this group, the monarch would also reward him with land grants that generated income. From the royal council emerged the senate in the 15th century. Its members included archbishops, bishops, and the highest-ranking officials: the chancellor, vice-chancellor, treasurer, and grand marshal of the Crown. It is worth noting that the king not only appointed the most senior secular and ecclesiastical officials but also dignitaries in the provinces—voivodes and castellans. These offices were held for life. As a result, after a monarch's death, his successor had to cooperate with the existing political establishment that ensured the functioning of the state. He therefore had to build his circle of advisers carefully—among those appointed for life by his predecessor—and appoint new ones judiciously.²

Fitting from the staff of Grand Marshal of the Crown Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, late 17th century

[National Museum in Kraków / Princes Czartoryski Museum]



¹J. Wyrozumski, *Geneza Senatu w Polsce*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warsaw 1993, p. 24.

²Z. Góralski, *Urzędy i godności w dawnej Polsce*, Warsaw 1983, pp. 61–111 et seq.

'The General Sejm and the regional *sejmiki*—key components of the parliamentary system—emerged through the evolution of medieval territorial assemblies (congresses and gatherings) at the national, provincial, and regional levels, as well as through the transformation of the composition and powers of the royal council.'³

Members of this council, together with the reigning monarch, often attended regional assemblies of the nobility, known as *sejmiki*, but most importantly participated in general assemblies, where decisions were made on matters such as taxation, and occasionally privileges for the nobility were confirmed. It is therefore fair to say that **the royal council, alongside the monarch, played a co-governing role in the state.**⁴

History, as a field driven by inquiry and the search for new sources, values dates that help researchers organise the development of historical events. The dates of battles, wars, treaties, or the reigns of rulers are usually the easiest to pinpoint. However, when it comes to certain processes—such as customary law—it is far more difficult to determine precisely when a phenomenon or institution took definitive shape and began to function. This is the case when we try to identify the moment when a three-chamber parliament—comprising the king, the senate (also called the *panowie rada* or royal council), and the chamber of deputies—began its deliberations in the Polish lands. A clear answer may not be possible.

Since the beginning of the 21st century—especially since 2018—a small group of historians have increasingly supported the view that this occurred in 1468.⁵ However, the vast majority of scholars—prominent historians publishing throughout the 20th century and into the early 21st—have argued that only the 1493 Sejm can be regarded as a fully developed legislative body in the Polish legal system. This was for decades the accepted scholarly consensus, frequently cited and reiterated in textbooks.⁶ It has been written that in 1493, 'at a general assembly in Piotrków, delegates from regional *sejmiki* formed a chamber of deputies acting independently of the king and his council. **Although this event went largely unnoticed by contemporary chroniclers, it shaped the structure of the Polish parliament for almost 300 years.** The principle of representation replaced the earlier right of all knights to participate in the general Sejm, and was soon followed by the centralisation of legislation, which ensured a unified body of statutory law for all the lands and voivodeships of the realm'.⁷

³M. Wrede, M. Wrede, *Sejmy i sejmiki Pierwszej Rzeczypospolitej. Dokumenty w zbiorach Biblioteki Narodowej*, Warsaw 1999, p. 6.

⁴J. Bardach, *Początki sejmu*, in: *Historia sejmu polskiego*, vol. I, ed. J. Michalski, Warsaw 1984, p. 13.

⁵D. Kupisz, *Od Piotrkowa do Warszawy*, Warsaw 2018, p. 9; W. Uruszcak, *Najstarszy sejm walny koronny „dwuizbowy” w Piotrkowie w 1468 roku*, Warsaw 2018, p. 30 et seq.; idem, *Pierwszy dwuizbowy sejm walny Królestwa Polskiego*, in: 'Mówią wieki' 2018, No 1 (special issue), p. 10.

⁶J. Bardach, *Sejm dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, in: *Dzieje sejmu polskiego*, Warsaw 2011, p. 21.

⁷W. Kulisiwicz, *500 lat sejmu polskiego 1493–1993*, Warsaw 1993, p. 5 [exhibition catalogue].



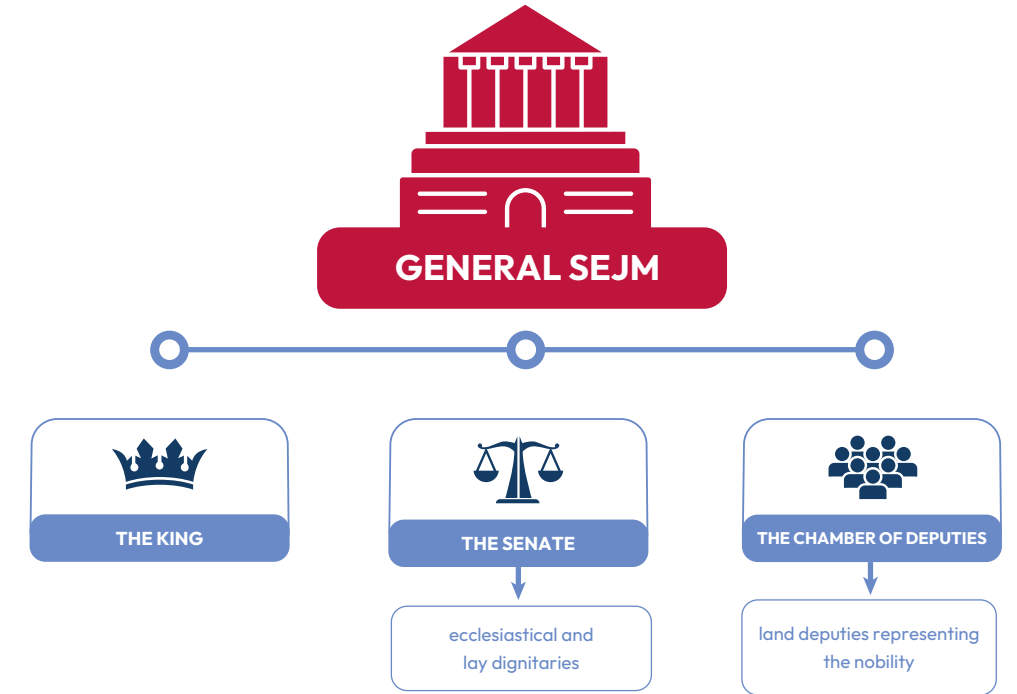
Sejmik in Środa Wielkopolska.
Engraving by Johann Nepomuk Passini

[National Library / Polona]



The General Sejm under King Alexander I Jagiellon (Aleksander Jagiellończyk)

[Jan Łaski, *Statutes – a compilation of laws and privileges prepared by the Grand Chancellor of the Crown in 1505, entitled *Commune incliti Poloniae regni privilegium...*, Kraków 1506]*



The Sejm of 1505 played a pivotal role in consolidating this system, adopting a constitution known to historians as *Nihil novi* (Latin for ‘nothing new’), named after the words in the opening paragraph of the document: ‘Nothing new [shall be decided] without the consent of the lords of the council and the land deputies...’ It was thereby enacted and recorded that the General Sejm became the principal representative body of the nobility and, at the same time, the ‘supreme legislative organ, confirming that nothing new could be entered into the laws without the consent of the entirety—i.e. the nobility, represented by this highest-ranking noble assembly.’⁸ The next milestone came with the negotiations and conclusion of the Union of Lublin in 1569, which established the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

⁸ S. Grzybowski, *Dzieje Polski i Litwy (1506–1648)*, in: *Wielka Historia Polski*, vol. 4, Kraków 2000, p. 121.



[Constitucie, Statuta y Przywileie na walnych Seymiech Koronnych od Roku Pańskiego 1550 aż do Roku 1581 uchwalone, Kraków 1581]

‘The resulting political organism was a distinctive construction. The state took on a constitutional form that stood in contrast to the developing absolutism of the age and to the prevailing principle of religious uniformity in Old Europe (*cuius regio, eius religio* – the ruler’s faith determines that of his subjects). With the possible exception of the Ottoman Empire, there was no other polity in Europe at the time as diverse in every respect. The constitutional structures of the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were different. Residents of each part of the Commonwealth were subject to various systems of law—Polish, Lithuanian, Ruthenian, German, Wallachian, as well as Jewish and Armenian. The legal norms governing the lives of townspeople, nobles, and clergy also differed from one another.’⁹

In 1572, King Sigismund II Augustus (Zygmunt August), the last male heir of the Jagiellonian dynasty, passed away. A year later, during the first royal election, the newly chosen monarch, Henry de Valois (Henryk Walezy), accepted the so-called Henrician Articles, which addressed key constitutional matters and further entrenched the monarch’s dependence on the Senate.¹⁰

The monarch traditionally designated the venue for the Sejm sessions. In the late Middle Ages and the period of the Kingdom of Poland, the centrally located town of Piotrków—later known as Piotrków Trybunalski—was most often selected. ‘From the early 15th century to 1492, sixty-five general assemblies were held in Piotrków, where matters of state, border defence, and taxation were deliberated. Historians differ on which of these gatherings should be classified as *sejmy*, typically using the participation of noble deputies elected at local sejmiki as the defining criterion.’¹¹ Sejm sessions were occasionally held at the Royal Castle on the Wawel Hill in Kraków.

⁹ H. Samsonowicz, *Kręgi cywilizacji po Europie się rozchodzą*, in: *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów, w 400 lat od zdobycia Smoleńska, w 442 lata od unii lubelskiej, w 220 lat od uchwalenia Konstytucji 3 maja, czyli rzecz o 222 latach potęgi i upadku republiki szlacheckiej, przez zacnych historyków* podana, „Polityka. Pomocnik Historyczny” 2011, No 4, p. 11.

¹⁰ S. Grzybowski, *Dzieje Polski i Litwy...*, op. cit., p. 169

¹¹ T. Nowakowski, *Piotrków w dziejach polskiego parlamentaryzmu*, Piotrków Trybunalski 2005, p. 20.



Act of the Union of Lublin, formation of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1569

[The Central Archives of Historical Records, photo by Maciej Bronarski]

From the second half of the 16th century, as the constitutional structure of the Commonwealth became more established, Sejm sessions were increasingly held at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, due to its more convenient location and better accessibility from various corners of the realm. Today, both of the largest royal castles still feature large chambers that once hosted separate debates for deputies and senators.¹² Sejm sessions were also occasionally held in other cities, including Toruń, Bydgoszcz, Parczew, Lublin, and Grodno.¹³ A dignitary's journey to the Sejm from distant provinces of the Commonwealth by carriage, accompanied by a retinue, could take three or four weeks. Horses had to be changed every few hours, and at dusk, travel was paused for the night. Inns and roadside taverns operated at major crossroads. Numerous foreign travellers recorded accounts of such journeys. One 17th-century visitor to Polish lands wrote:

'In this country, one usually finds only wooden buildings known as *karczmy* (inns), where it is often necessary to lodge alongside horses, cows, and pigs in a long stable built of loosely joined planks and roofed with straw. There is usually a room with a stove at the back, but in summer it is barely tolerable due to the flies, fleas, bedbugs, and foul odours. No one opens the windows, no matter how hot it is. As a result, travellers prefer sleeping in the stable in summer rather than in the room, where the innkeeper lives with his children and household animals—and where, very often, a barrel of sauerkraut is stored, whose smell is unpleasant to visitors, though locals are used to it. When travelling in summer, one is better off sleeping in a barn on fresh straw than enduring such lodging.'¹⁴

Therefore, a deputy or senator heading to the Sejm would often plan the journey so as to spend the nights not in inns but in manor houses or palaces of relatives—close or distant—even if it required a detour. In the Sarmatian culture of the nobility, family ties held great significance and were carefully maintained. A visiting relative, regardless of rank, was welcomed with full hospitality, and their entourage too could expect decent accommodation and meals. Travel to the Sejm involved changing horses, carriages, carts for servants, carts with trunks (for clothes, supplies, and documents), and often an armed escort to ensure the traveller's safety—all of which were standard elements of such expeditions.

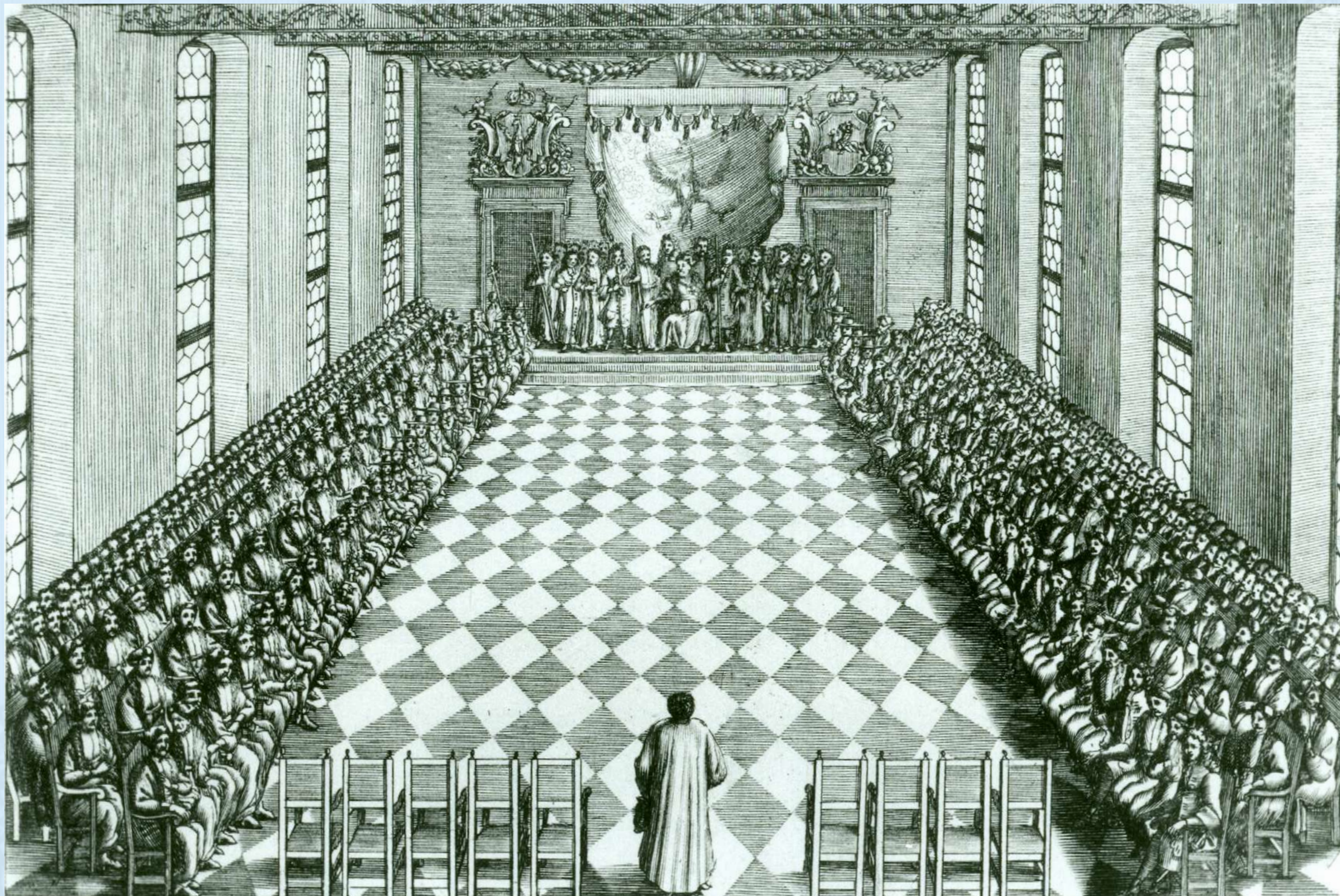
¹¹ T. Nowakowski, *Piotrków w dziejach polskiego parlamentaryzmu*, Piotrków Trybunalski 2005, p. 20.

¹² B. Wierzbicka, *Senat – architektura i sztuka. Wnętrza senackie na przestrzeni pięciu wieków*, Warszawa 2019, p. 156 et seq.

¹³ J. Pietrzak, *Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Tradycja i współczesność XV–XXI w.*, Warszawa 2010, p. 27.

¹⁴ M. Smolarski, *Dawna Polska w opisach cudzoziemców*, Warszawa 1958, pp. 105–106.





*The General Sejm
under King John III Sobieski
(Jan III Sobieski).*
Engraving by Charles de la Haye, before 1694

[National Library / Polona]

In the early period, Sejm sessions lasted several or a dozen days; however, as the number of matters requiring deliberation grew, the sessions could stretch to several weeks. Outside the sessions of the General Sejm, the Senate continued to function as the royal council.

‘Every Sejm began with a solemn service in the parish church, from where the deputies and senators proceeded [...] to the castle, where the chancellor, on the king’s behalf, informed the assembled members about the matters requiring deliberation. The senators would then speak in order of seniority, after which the deputies—having received royal permission—would retire to a separate chamber to discuss the presented issues amongst themselves. Once a common position had been agreed upon, it would be conveyed to the king and Senate by appointed speakers—what we would now call reporting deputies. If needed, the senators also expressed their views, sometimes in the absence of the deputies (who were excluded from proceedings), and at other times in their presence. The king always spoke last. This arrangement ensured that agreement had been reached between the senators and the deputies beforehand, and the king’s speech then gave legal sanction to the Sejm’s resolutions. State matters that did not infringe upon the nobility’s privileges were discussed by the king in Senate meetings without the participation of the deputies. **By the 16th century, Sejm resolutions—referred to as constitutions—were already being printed, thus allowing for wider distribution.**’¹⁵

The practice, rooted in medieval tradition and gradually refined over the decades, gave rise to a form of democracy known as nobles’ democracy. This system functioned through the interplay of multiple interconnected components, and is difficult to analyse in isolation. The responsibilities of high-ranking central officials—who, by virtue of their office, were members of the Senate—serve as a good example.

‘The office of the marshal was the most prestigious. The marshal was responsible for security in the king’s surroundings, managed the royal court, and exercised police and criminal jurisdiction wherever the king resided. He wielded these powers with the support of the marshal’s guard and prison service. He also served as master of ceremonies and presided over the Senate. The deputy to the Grand Marshal of the Crown was the Court Marshal. The Grand Chancellor of the Crown was the most senior official in the Commonwealth. He managed both foreign and domestic policy, headed the royal chancellery and the *metryka* (record office), which maintained copies of all issued acts. As a “guardian of the law”, he ensured royal acts conformed to legal norms and validated them with the chancellor’s seal. His deputy was the Vice-Chancellor, who held the lesser seal. The Grand Treasurer of the Crown was responsible for collecting and distributing state revenues. He managed financial inflows and outflows, oversaw the mint, and took charge of the royal treasury and archives.’¹⁶

¹⁵ T. Nowakowski, *Piotrków w dziejach...*, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁶ M. Pieleś, *Administracja i społeczeństwo Rzeczypospolitej Obojga Narodów*, in: *Polska samorządowa. Ilustrowane dzieje administracji i samorządu terytorialnego na tle historii Polski*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 154–155.

¹⁷ K. Przyboś, *Stanisława Dunina Karwickiego opinia o Senacie*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warszawa 1993, p. 125.

Unfortunately, the home-grown democratic model gradually began to degenerate. ‘In the second half of the 17th century, the magnates in effect took control of power in the Commonwealth. They came to dominate almost entirely in the Senate, took control of the *sejmiki* (regional assemblies), and wielded overwhelming influence in the Chamber of Deputies—once the domain of the middle nobility.’¹⁷ Some figures in public life recognised this danger, but over the course of the 18th century no effective reform mechanism could be implemented. The Commonwealth became a state with a particularly inefficient central government. The first and second partitions of Poland followed. Near the end of its independence, the Great Sejm of 1791 adopted a highly progressive document known as the Constitution of 3 May, but there was no time to implement it fully. Soon came the third and final partition of Polish lands, bringing about the end of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The Constitution of 3 May 1791

The first constitution in Europe and the second in the world—after the American Constitution—to regulate the entire structure of the state. It abolished the old law *liberum veto* and introduced a hereditary monarchy. It established a tripartite division of powers into:

1

Legislative power

- a bicameral Sejm (comprising the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate), elected for a 2-year term,
- voting was conducted by a majority of votes,
- 132 senators and 204 deputies

2

Executive power

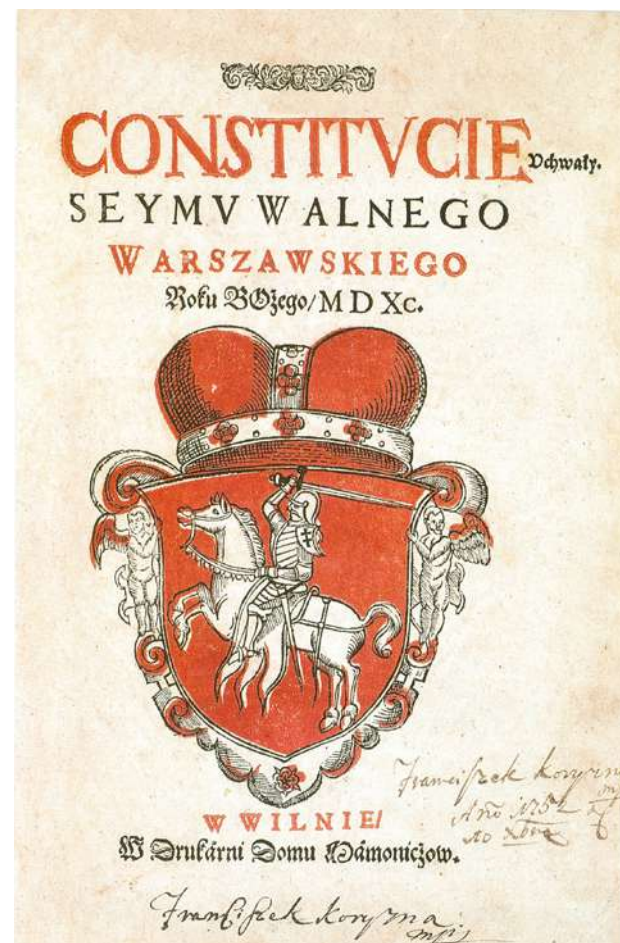
- the king and the guardians of the laws (a council composed of 5 ministers)

3

Judicial power

- independent courts (separately for burghers, nobility, and peasants from former royal estates)

Title pages of legal codes enacted by the General Sejms in the 16th and 17th centuries



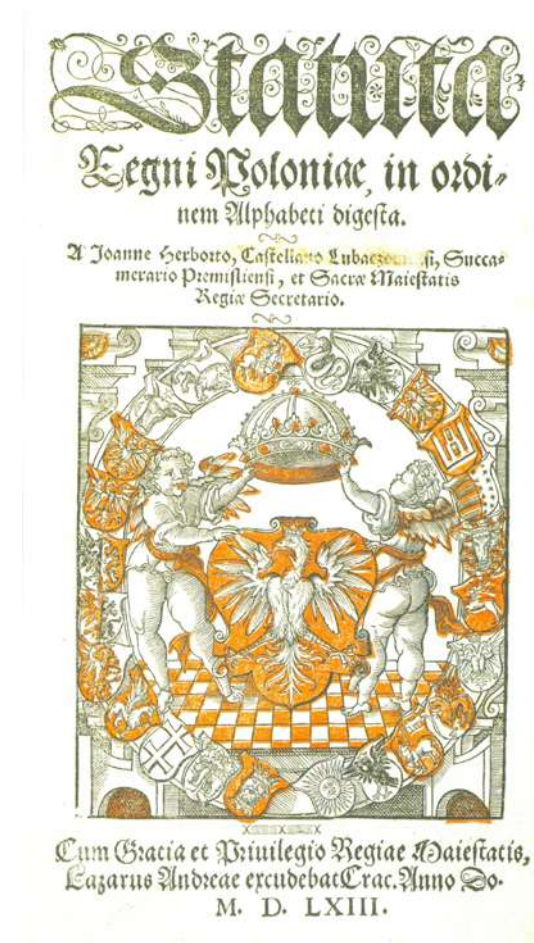
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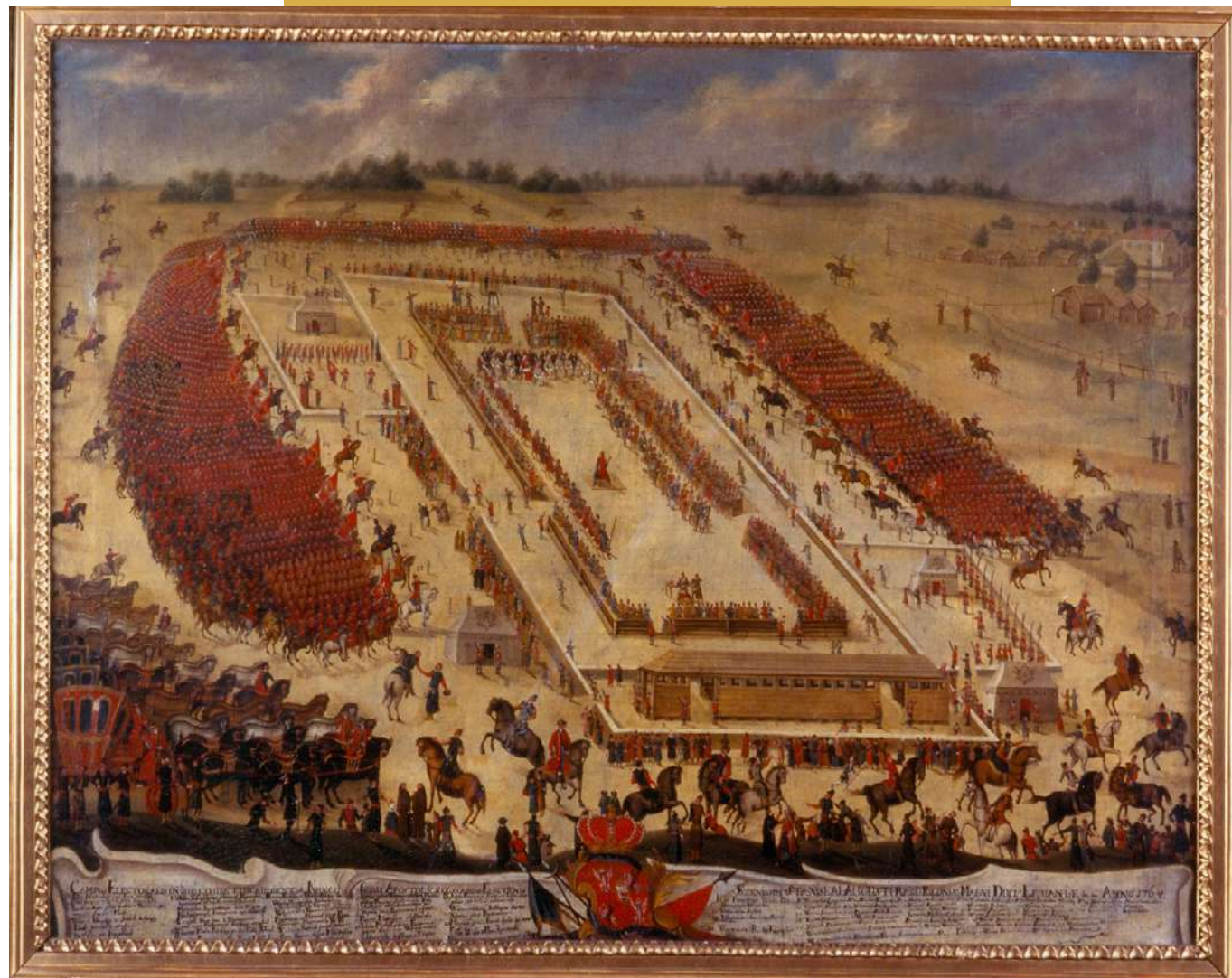
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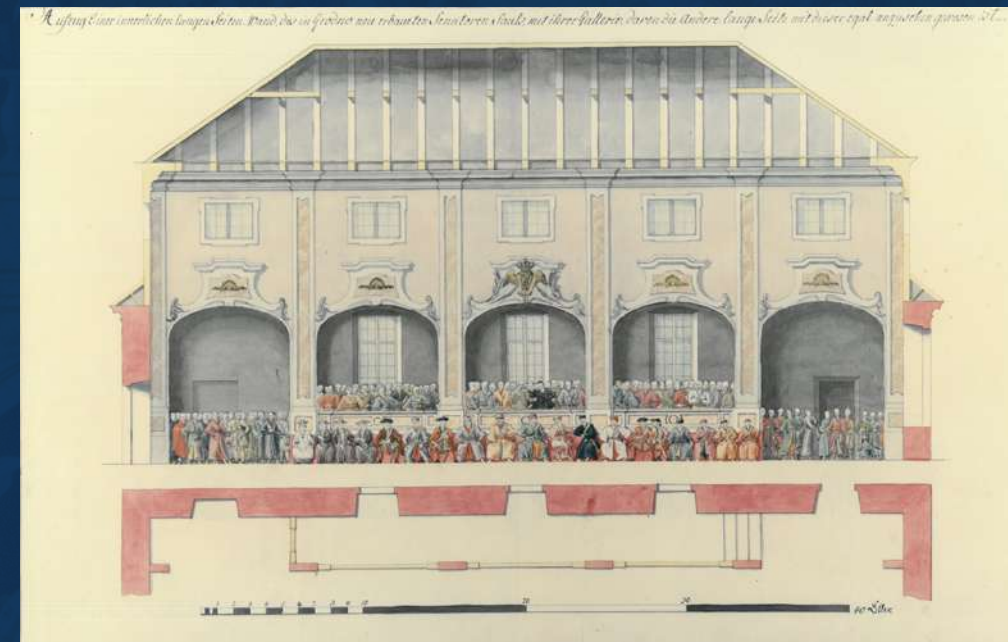


[National Library]



*The Election of King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski
(Stanisław August Poniatowski), 1764 r.
Artist unknown*

[National Museum in Wrocław]



*Design (cross-section) of the Senate Hall
in the New Castle in Grodno, second half
of the 18th century*

[© Saxon State Archives, Main State
Archive in Dresden]



*Adoption of the Constitution
of 3 May, 1791
Painting from 1938 by artists
of the Brotherhood of Saint Luke*

[Polish History Museum]

The Senate in the Polish Lands in the 19th Century

With the loss of independence, the dawn of the 19th century and the Napoleonic Wars raised hopes for a partial restoration of Polish statehood and its symbols. Full sovereignty, however, was not regained: the Duchy of Warsaw remained subordinate to the French Empire, and from 1815 the Kingdom of Poland became entirely dependent on the Russian Empire. While both entities preserved some external forms—names and administrative practices—they did not restore the constitutional framework of the old Commonwealth. ‘The history of the Senate in the Duchy of Warsaw and in the constitutional period of the Kingdom of Poland is a brief episode in the life of the institution, occurring at the turning point between two historical epochs. It was during this transition from feudalism to capitalism that both the Sejm and the Senate operated under conditions of only partial independence.’¹⁸ When Napoleon established the Duchy of Warsaw and granted it a constitution in 1807, he instituted a bicameral parliament. This move partly met the demands of Polish independence advocates. However, key decisions continued to be taken in foreign capitals, reducing the Polish Sejm and Senate to largely symbolic roles.

‘Somewhat surprisingly, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies survived the fall of the Duchy of Warsaw. Their continued existence was provided for in the constitution of the Kingdom of Poland. This state entity, created by Tsar Alexander I, was dependent on Russia and linked to it by a perpetual personal union. In many respects, the Kingdom of Poland continued the constitutional solutions of the Duchy of Warsaw, especially regarding parliamentary representation.’¹⁹

¹⁸ F. Połomski, *Senat w Księstwie Warszawskim i Królestwie Polskim (do wybuchu powstania listopadowego)*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warsaw 1993, p. 158.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 161.

The Sejm of the Duchy of Warsaw met only twice (in March 1809 and December 1811), and that of the Kingdom of Poland four times (March–April 1818, September–October 1820, May–June 1825, and May–June 1830). Both chambers became more active following the outbreak of the November Uprising in late 1830. For a brief moment, hopes were raised of shaking off the hated yoke of foreign rule. The Sejm declared the Tsar dethroned and assumed many of the monarch’s prerogatives.²⁰ However, in the face of international isolation, military defeats, and a Russian offensive in 1831, members of both chambers fled Warsaw. Their final session took place in the monastery at Zakroczym from 11 to 20 September 1831. Shortly thereafter, leading political figures went into exile. In 1832, the Kingdom of Poland was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire.

In the Austrian partition, the so-called Republic of Kraków (or Free City of Kraków) was established in the region of Kraków and its surroundings after the Congress of Vienna. It had a local Governing Senate, although its activity was limited to local affairs. The institution was dissolved in 1846 following the failed Kraków Uprising.²¹



Passes known as bilety wniścia, printed in two colours and authorising access to the Senate or Deputies’ Chamber, early 19th century

[Diocesan Museum in Płock]

²⁰ M. Karpińska, *Senatorowie, posłowie i deputowani Księstwa Warszawskiego i Królestwa Polskiego*, Warsaw 2002, p. 20.

²¹ J. Bieniarzówna, *Senat w Rzeczypospolitej Krakowskiej*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warsaw 1993, pp. 167–174.



Senatorial uniform
of Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski

[National Museum in Kraków / Princes Czartoryski
Museum in Kraków, photo by S. Michta]



Opening of the Sejm of the Kingdom of Poland, 1818
Painting by Michał Stachowicz

[Bishop's Palace in Kraków, photo by A. Welnicki]

The Senate in the Interwar Period (1922–1939)

Poland regained its independence in 1918. General elections were held, and in early 1919 a constituent assembly was convened. Its work culminated in the adoption of a new constitution in March 1921, later known as the March Constitution. Following the successful vote, a recess was declared, and all parliamentarians walked on foot from the building on Wiejska Street—less than three kilometres away—in a national procession through Nowy Świat and Krakowskie Przedmieście to the Archcathedral of St. John the Baptist. The sight of the deputies marching stirred great enthusiasm among onlookers, amplified by newsboys hawking special newspaper editions announcing the adoption of the constitution. In the Gothic cathedral, which since the 16th century had hosted members of parliament every few years—and where the Constitution of 3 May was once sworn in—the hymn *Te Deum Laudamus* was sung in thanksgiving. The Marshal of the Sejm, Wojciech Trąpczyński, then laid a wreath at the foot of the statue of Stanisław Małachowski, Marshal of the Great Sejm. In doing so, they revived the old Polish custom of offering prayers of thanksgiving at the conclusion of parliamentary sessions, while also paying tribute to one of the leading reformers of Poland's 18th-century political system. Based on the new constitution, elections to the Sejm and Senate of the first term were held in November 1922. The Senate consisted of 111 members, elected by universal suffrage for 5-year terms.



111 senators



5 years

‘The Senate’s powers were limited. It had no right to initiate legislation, which rested with the Sejm and the government. The Upper House also lacked oversight powers over the government; senators could only submit interpellations. **The Senate and Sejm together formed the National Assembly, responsible for electing the President of the Republic.** The Senate reviewed every bill passed by the Sejm; it could object or propose amendments. The Senate’s term ended—or it was dissolved—together with the Sejm. Conversely, dissolving the Sejm by the president required Senate approval.’²²

²² A. Podolska-Meducka, *Historia*, see: <http://senat.edu.pl/historia/> [accessed on: 23.01.2025].

In the early 1930s, work on a new constitution intensified. It was adopted in April 1935. The new constitution curtailed the powers of both parliamentary chambers in favour of the head of state—the President—but also strengthened the role of the Upper House in relation to the Sejm. From that point forward, the Marshal of the Senate was to assume the duties of the head of state in the event of the president’s death or permanent incapacity. The Marshal also played a key role in nominating candidates for the office of President. While the new constitution did not grant the Senate the right to initiate legislation, it increased the threshold of votes in the Sejm required to override Senate amendments to bills. As before, 5-year terms were retained for both chambers. However, the number of senators was reduced to 96. One-third of them (32) were appointed by the President, while the remaining 64 were elected indirectly by special electoral colleges. These colleges consisted of citizens meeting certain criteria, such as educational attainment, public trust, national honours, or service in local government, trade unions, or social work.²³



Entrance to the Sejm and the Senate building, 1930
[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1216]

²³ Ibid.

The April Constitution of 1935
significantly curtailed the powers
of both houses of parliament
(the Sejm and the Senate)
in favour of the Head of State:

ELECTORAL LAW

-  the 5-year term of office of the Senate was maintained
-  the number of senators was reduced to 96
-  32 senators appointed by the President of the Republic of Poland
-  64 senators elected by electoral colleges

The peaceful functioning of the Polish state came to an abrupt end with the German invasion and the outbreak of the Second World War. On 2 September 1939, both the Sejm and the Senate convened for what would be their final sessions. On 5 September, a number of parliamentarians and politicians attended a Holy Mass at Warsaw's Archcathedral, praying for the successful defence of the country. Meanwhile, central government offices were being evacuated. Following the Soviet invasion on 17 September, Polish authorities crossed the eastern border of the Republic. In exile, political transitions occurred in accordance with the April Constitution. Władysław Raczkiewicz—who had served as Marshal of the Senate during the third term (1930–1935)—was appointed President in France. On 2 November 1939, he dissolved both chambers of the Polish parliament. In early December, he decreed that new parliamentary elections would be held 60 days after the end of the war.²⁴



Senatorial identification card of Marshal of the Senate Aleksander Prystor, 1938

[Courtesy of the Senate Archives; donation from the goddaughter]

²⁴ J. Pietrzak, *O kształtowaniu się koncepcji Senatu w Polsce Odrodzonej*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warsaw 1993, p. 181.



Portrait of Władysław Raczkiewicz, Marshal of the Senate of the third term. Painted by Halina Karska.

[Royal Castle in Warsaw, photo by Maciej Bronarski]



Session of the National Assembly during the presidential election, 1926

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1097-1]



Session of the National Assembly, public gallery, 1926

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1097-3]



[Sejm Library / Museum Department]



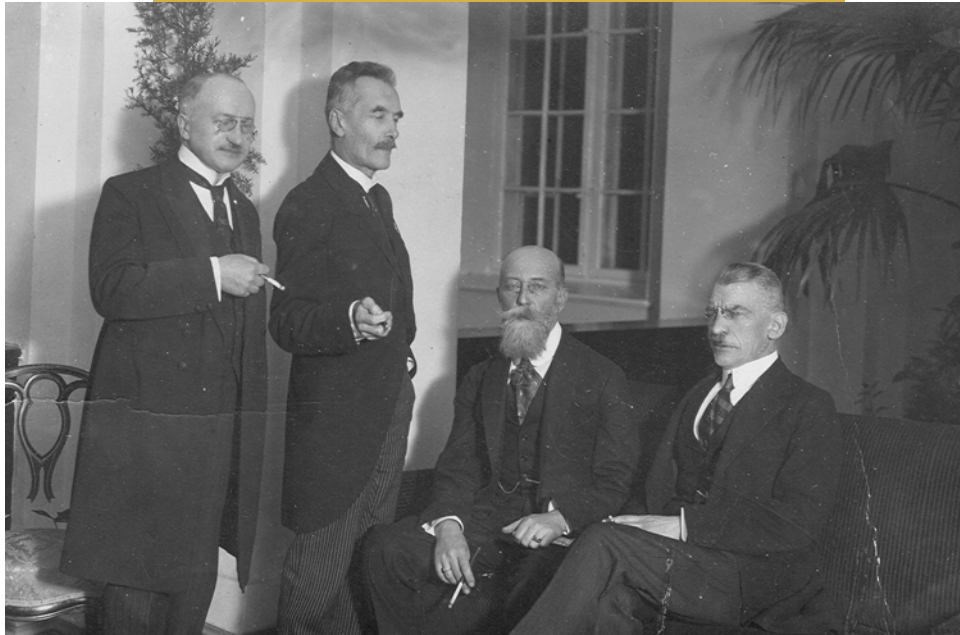
Posters encouraging participation in Senate elections

[National Library / Social Life Documents Collection]



Parliamentary election campaign for the Sejm and Senate, 1930 and 1938

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-819-6]
[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-925-1]



Senators during a break in Senate proceedings, from left: Ignacy Baliński, Władysław Jabłonowski, Jan Stecki, and Bolesław Koskowski, December 1922

[Private collection]



Committee meeting on agrarian reform, September 1925. From left senators from the Polish People's Party 'Piast': Józefat Błyskosz, Tadeusz Kaniowski, Stanisław Biały, Józef Buzek, and Franciszek Ścibor

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1058-2b]



Budget debate in the Senate, February 1934

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1075]



Visit of Sejm and Senate members to the power plant in Szopienice, August 1937. Second row from the bottom: Marshal of the Senate of the fourth term Aleksander Prystor

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1138-4]

Towards the Modern-Day Senate

As a result of the major geopolitical shifts of 1944, political power in Poland was seized by the communists, supported by the Soviet Union. The Red Army remained stationed in Polish territory until the 1990s. In 1946, the communists organised a national referendum, which included a proposal to abolish the Senate as part of the constitutional order. The official results—widely believed to be falsified—indicated that a majority supported eliminating the Upper House. The following year, a so-called Small Constitution was adopted, and its provisions were later modified in 1952. That year, it was formally decreed that Poland would have a unicameral parliament.

For centuries, the **marshal's staff** has symbolised authority, dignity, and the office of the Marshal in Poland. Following the oldest parliamentary custom, the Marshal of the Senate opens and closes sessions by striking the floor three times with the staff.

The shaft of the current Senate marshal's staff bears three dates: 3 May 1791, commemorating the adoption of the Constitution of 3 May; 11 November 1918, marking the restoration of Poland's independence; and 4 June 1989, in memory of the first democratic post-war elections to the Senate. The top of the staff is adorned with a crown stylised after that of King Casimir III the Great (Kazimierz III Wielki) (14th century), and decorated with amber.

1947 r.

The Senate was abolished on the basis of falsified results of the national referendum conducted by the communist authorities.

1989 r.

The Senate was reinstated under the agreements of the Round Table.

The social and political changes in Poland that had been intensifying since the 1970s led to the emergence of the massive social movement known as 'Solidarity'. The communist authorities opposed change and attempted to suppress aspirations for freedom by introducing martial law in 1981. In 1988, facing an impending economic collapse, the government entered into talks with representatives of 'Solidarity'. At the beginning of 1989, the Round Table negotiations began. Based on the agreements reached, a systemic transformation was launched, including the restoration of the Senate. Parliamentary elections were held on 4 June (Senate elections were fully free, whereas those for the Sejm were only partially democratic). After a hiatus of five decades since the last session of the Senate of the Republic of Poland in 1939, a new composition of the Upper House was elected.

**4 June 1989 – first free
elections to the Senate**

In the newly restored Senate of 1989, 99% of seats were won by candidates supported by the former opposition, thereby making them jointly responsible for the fate of the state.²⁵

The parliamentary elections to both houses in 1991 were already fully democratic. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 retained the bicameral structure of the legislative branch. The Senate consists of 100 senators elected for a 4-year term in universal, direct, and secret elections held in single-member constituencies. The terms of the Senate and the Sejm end simultaneously. The first and sixth terms of the Senate were shortened by virtue of a Sejm resolution on self-dissolution, while the second term was shortened by a decision of the President of the Republic of Poland to dissolve the Sejm.



Round Table negotiations, 1989

[Polish Press Agency / Grzegorz Rogiński]

²⁵ A. Grześkowiak, *Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej I kadencji 1989–1991*, in: *Senat w Polsce. Dzieje i teraźniejszość*, Warsaw 1993, pp. 182–184.

ELECTORAL LAW



Elections to the Sejm and the Senate are universal, direct, and secret.



The 1997 Constitution maintains the tripartite division of powers into:

legislative, executive, and judicial



The Constitution stipulates the number of:

- deputies elected to the Sejm in multi-member constituencies (460)
- senators elected to the Senate in single-member constituencies (100)



The Sejm and the Senate are elected for a 4-year term.

Marshal of the Senate of the first term
Andrzej Stelmachowski during the inaugural session,
4 July 1989

[Photo by Erazm Ciołek]



First session of the Senate
in the Sejm chamber, 4 July 1989

[Photo by Erazm Ciołek]



View of the Column Hall during a Senate
sitting, 29 September 1990

[National Digital Archives / Central
Photographic Agency,
photo by Henryk Rosiak]



President Lech Wałęsa and the President
of the Republic of Poland in exile Ryszard
Kaczorowski in the company of Marshal
Andrzej Stelmachowski during the transfer
of the insignia of state power at the Royal
Castle in Warsaw, 22 December 1990.
The host of the ceremony was the Marshal
of the Senate, who conducted the negotiations
with representatives of the Polish government-
in-exile concerning the handover of the insignia.

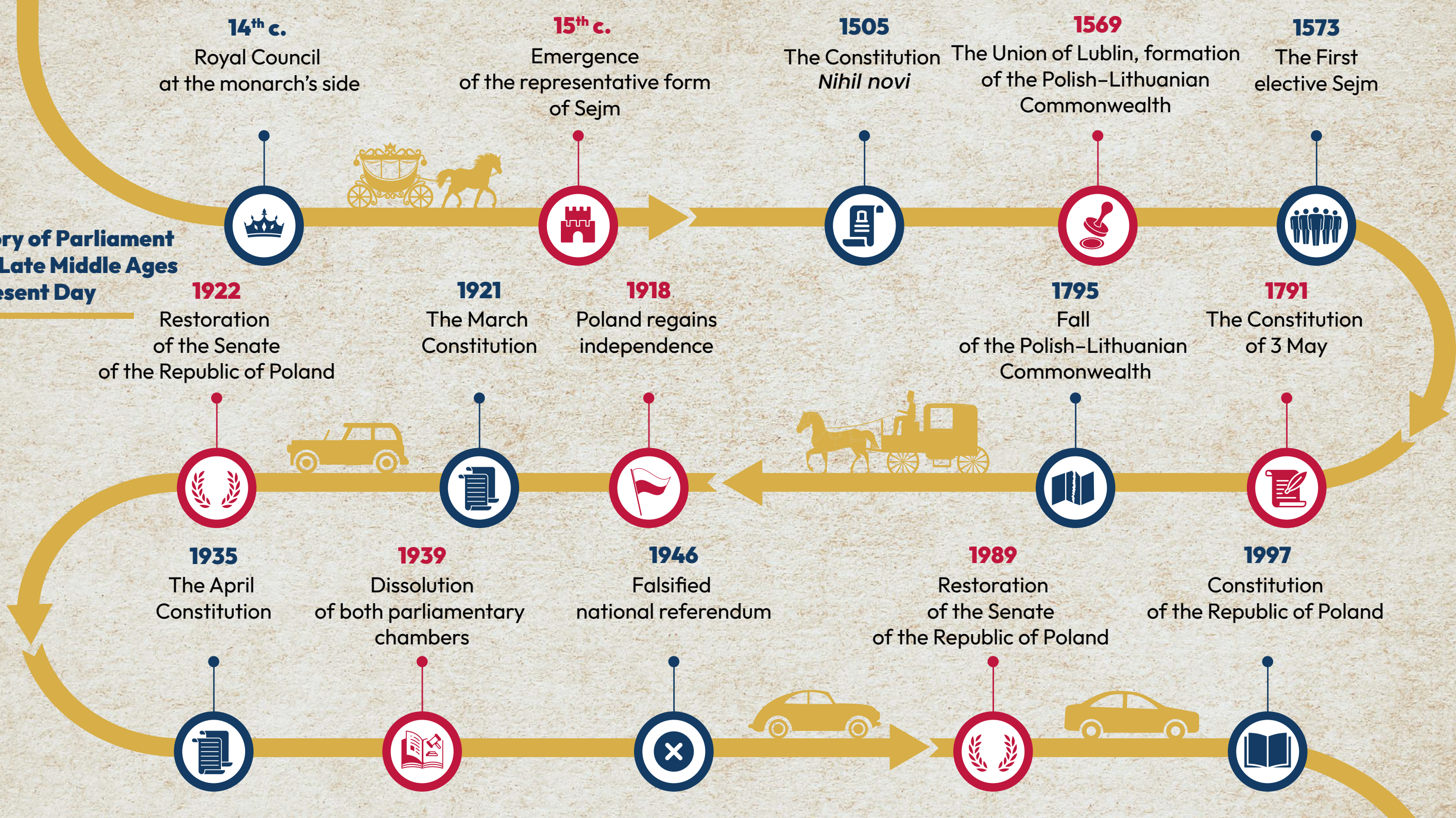
[Polish Press Agency,
photo by Ireneusz Radkiewicz]



Marshal of the Senate of the second
term August Chetkowski (first on the left)
and Marshal of the Sejm of the first term
Wiesław Chrzanowski in Piotrków
Trybunalski during the ceremony unveiling
a plaque commemorating the 500th
anniversary of Polish parliamentarism,
28 January 1993

[Polish Press Agency / Central Photographic
Agency, photo by Grzegorz Press]

The History of Parliament from the Late Middle Ages to the Present Day



The Senate's Commitment to the Polish Diaspora

During the interwar period, the Senate of the Republic of Poland addressed issues of emigration and maintaining ties with the Polish diaspora. A variety of initiatives were undertaken to integrate Poles living abroad. In 1929, the First Congress of Poles Abroad was held. It established an Organising Council to coordinate initiatives in support of diaspora matters. The President of the Council was Marshal of the Senate Julian Szymański. During the Second Congress in 1934, the World Union of Poles Abroad 'Światpol' was founded, bringing together most diaspora organisations. It was headed by Marshal of the Senate Władysław Raczkiewicz. 'Światpol' sought to strengthen the bond between the Polish diaspora and the homeland, cooperated with educational and cultural organisations abroad, raised funds, and subsidised diaspora publications. The Third Congress, planned for 1939, was cancelled due to the uncertain political situation in Europe.²⁶

Reviving the tradition of the interwar period, the Senate restored in 1989 once again took the Polish communities abroad under its care. In 1990, the Association 'Polish Community' (Polish: Stowarzyszenie „Wspólnota Polska”) was established, with Marshal of the Senate Andrzej Stelmachowski as its first president.

The Upper House works to maintain ties between the homeland and Poles or people of Polish descent living abroad. It follows current issues and the legal status of Polish communities in their countries of residence. It initiates activity and cooperation among Polish and diaspora communities around the world. It is committed to protecting Polish cultural heritage, national traditions and customs, allocating substantial budgetary resources to these goals.²⁷

Poster promoting the Second Congress of Poles Abroad, design by Zygmunt Glinicki, 1934

[Central Archives of Modern Records]

²⁶ D. Mycielska, J.M. Zawadzki, *Druga Rzeczpospolita wobec Polonii*, Warsaw 2008, p. 77 et seq.

²⁷ J. Pietrzak, *Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej...*, op. cit., pp. 262–264.



Marshal Władysław Raczkiewicz (first from left) announces the founding of the World Union of Poles Abroad 'Światpol', 1934

[National Digital Archives, ref. I-Z-53-10]



Diploma from the Second Sports Games of Poles Abroad, 1934

[Sports and Tourism Museum in Warsaw]



Course on Polish knowledge for diaspora instructors, 1938

[National Digital Archives, ref. I-Z-82-4]



The Second Congress of Poles Abroad at Wawel Hill, Kraków, 1934

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-Z-53-13 and 1-Z-53-17]



Marshal Alicja Grześkowiak presenting computers to a Polish school John Paul II Junior High School in Vilnius, 1998

[Senate Archives]



Session of the Polish Diaspora Consultative Council, 2024

[Senate Archives, photo by Łukasz Kamiński]



The Fifth World Congress of the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad, organised by the Chancellery of the Senate, the Association 'Polish Community', and the Council of the Polish Diaspora, 2018

[Senate Archives, photo by Michał Józefaciuk]



Participants of the World Congress of Young Leaders of the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad with Marshal Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska in the corridors, 12 December 2024

[Senate Archives, photo by Łukasz Kamiński]

The Seat of the Polish Parliament in the 20th and 21st Centuries

In the second half of the 18th century, the area surrounding the present seat of the Polish Parliament on Wiejska Street had a semi-rural character. It featured vast farmland and pastures, orchards and groves. A large portion of this land belonged to Prince Casimir Poniatowski (Kazimierz Poniatowski) (1721–1800), the brother of the last king of Poland, who had his residence near the edge of the escarpment. A reminder of this is the nearby street name – Książęca (Prince's Street). The prince's residence was surrounded by a vast park with pavilions and ponds. An exotic minaret and a pineapple house were built there, and even a vast underground grotto was hollowed out, where the prince hosted banquets. One of the ponds, near today's Rozbrat Street, featured an island where monkeys were bred for a time. On a corner of this extensive estate (at the junction of today's Wiejska and Górnośląska Streets, where the parliamentary post office currently operates), there was at the time a popular café called 'Wiejska Kawa', located in a large single-storey building. It was extremely fashionable among Warsaw's elite in the second half of the 18th century. In winter, it was a favoured destination for sleigh rides. Guests could enjoy heated, intimate booths. From spring onwards, its great asset was the orchard at the back, with arbours and tables for guests, a place for an orchestra, a striking view of the distant bend of the Vistula River (about 5–6 kilometres away), and an idyllic panorama of the opposite bank and nearby Saska Kępa. Near the edge of the escarpment (where the pedestrian footbridge now crosses Górnośląska Street), duels were fought in the mid-18th century.



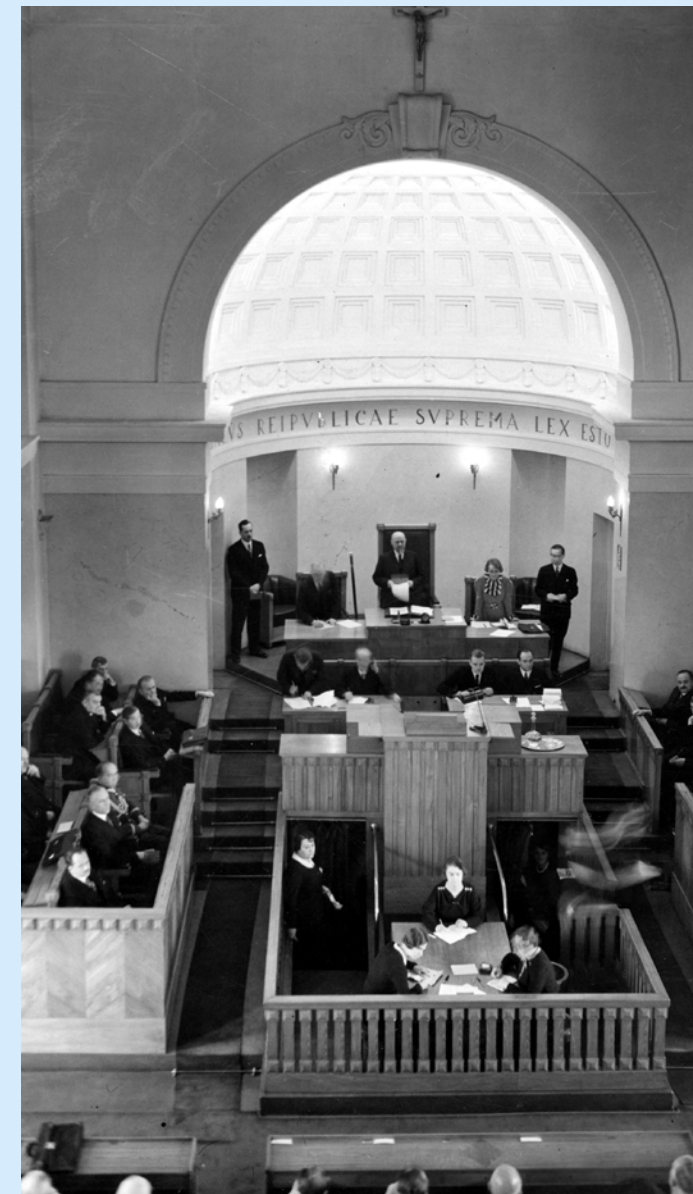
'Wiejska Kawa' from the side of Wiejska Street, based on a drawing by Jan Groński

[Warsaw Public Library, ref. Szt. Mus. n. 773 Cim.]



Southern façade of the Noble Institute, completed in 1853. Over time, the side western entrance (visible on the left, near Wiejska Street) became the main entrance.

[‘Józefa Ungra Kalendarz Warszawski’ 1854, p. 85]



Interior of the Senate chamber, condition after 1928 reconstruction

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1083]

In the mid-19th century, buildings of the Noble Institute (a boys' boarding school for 225 pupils) were erected deeper within the estate. In 1862, it was transformed into the Alexandrine-Mary Institute for the Education of Young Ladies. The newly established girls' secondary school was placed under the educational authority of Saint Petersburg. It operated for over fifty years and educated daughters of Russian officials, officers, teachers, and clergy. Russians had been settling in Polish lands with their families since the first half of the 19th century and increasingly made up the administrative class in these territories. After the outbreak of World War I, the school staff was evacuated deep into Russia. In 1915, the buildings were taken over by the Prussian military and converted into a field hospital.



Entrance to the Sejm and the Senate buildings from Wiejska Street, c. 1930

[National Digital Archives, ref. 1-A-1212-1]



Marshal of the Senate B. Miedziński and Marshal of the Sejm W. Makowski took part in the civil defence trench-digging campaign in the capital.

[*'Gazeta Polska'*, 30 August 1939, p. 5]

Marszałek Senatu B. Miedziński i Marszałek Sejmu W. Makowski wzięli udział w akcji kopania rowów ochronnych w stolicy.

After Poland regained independence, the date of elections to the Polish Constituent Assembly was set for 1919. Due to the poor technical condition of the Royal Castle in Warsaw, it was decided that the temporary seat of parliament would be the spacious dining hall and aula of the Alexandrine-Mary Institute for the Education of Young Ladies on Wiejska Street. Former classrooms were repurposed as offices for staff supporting parliamentarians in their work, headquarters of parliamentary clubs and committees, and meeting rooms. In 1921, a new constitution was adopted. Based on it, elections were held in 1922 to both houses of parliament—the Sejm and the Senate. Members of parliament met in the same hall in alternating sessions. Unfortunately, the hall was uncomfortable, elongated in shape, and had poor acoustics. A decision was made to add to the complex a modern, semicircular assembly hall for 444 deputies (now 460). Its interior was decorated with monumental columns and slabs of brown marble. The hall was completed in 1928 and continues to serve its function to this day. In the same year, the former plenary hall was rebuilt, reduced in size, and reserved exclusively for the Senate. It was in these chambers that Polish parliamentarians worked until the outbreak of the Second World War. In the early weeks of the war, the Sejm and the Senate buildings were deliberately and precisely bombed by the German Luftwaffe.²⁸

²⁸ J.M. Zawadzki, *O salach Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w latach międzywojennych i architekcie Stanisławie Miecznikowskim*, Warsaw 2021.



Ruins of the Senate chamber, c. 1945

[Sejm Library, Museum Department]

After the war, the authorities commissioned the renowned architect Bohdan Pniewski (1897–1965) to design a new parliamentary complex to harmonise with the semicircular Sejm chamber from 1928. Pniewski proposed an architectural concept inspired by European trends of the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, he used modern technologies, respecting the achievements of the avant-garde; on the other, he believed that representative buildings should have refined form and be constructed with the finest materials. The façades featured the whitest sandstone available in Poland. The cladding was designed so that the arrangement of shadows would change with the time of day. The interior colour scheme was based on a palette of whites and greys (walls and floors), occasionally enriched with black elements in the flooring. The entire complex was completed in 1952.

Various institutions occupied the complex alongside the parliament. The Council of State—whose prerogatives were assumed by the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland in 1989—operated at Wiejska Street the longest. Until the early 1990s, the site also housed the Archive and Library of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, which functioned as the only genuine political force under communism. The Higher School of Social Sciences, later transformed into the Academy of Social Sciences, also operated on the premises.

Following the re-establishment of the Senate in 1989, its initial sessions were held in Sejm chambers, where Senate staff also worked to prepare meetings of the Upper House. In late 1989 and early 1990, discussions were held on whether to construct a new building to serve as the Senate's permanent seat. Ultimately, a decision was taken to adapt part of the existing Sejm premises to accommodate the needs of the Upper Chamber.

Senate building, park-facing façade

[Senate Archives, photo by Marta Marchlewska-Wilczak]





The staircase in the Senate building – a testimony to the exceptional skill of chief architect Bohdan Pniewski and the artisans who executed the design

[Senate Archives, photo by Tomasz Paczos]

The Senate occupies one of the sections of the parliamentary complex, housed in buildings formerly used by the Archive and Library of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) and the now-defunct Academy of Social Sciences. Architects merged three rooms on the first floor to create what is today the debating chamber of the Senate of the Republic of Poland. Nearby is a wing dedicated to the offices of the Chancellery of the Senate. A remarkable architectural feature of the Senate building is its circular marble staircase. **Its structure rests solely on two narrow, vertical internal walls that rise from the basement to the second floor. It is a masterpiece of Polish decorative and structural design from the mid-20th century.** Its refined proportions, the optical lightness of the construction, and ease of use make it a truly exceptional element. The described staircase and interior spaces are not only places of work for senators, officials, and journalists. They also provide a fitting backdrop for state ceremonies attended by the highest-ranking officials and visiting foreign dignitaries.



A vote taking place during a sitting of the Senate

[Senate Archives, photo by Hubert Pielas]

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The Election of King Stanislaus Augustus Poniatowski (Stanisław August Poniatowski), 1764
Artist unknown
[National Museum in Wrocław]

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Map of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, engraved by Georges Louis Le Rouge, 1748
[Royal Castle in Warsaw – Museum, Collection of Dr Tomasz Niewodniczański
(ref. TN 708), on deposit from the Deutsch-Polnische Stiftung Kulturpflege
und Denkmalschutz (Görlitz)]

Inside back cover:

Senate constituencies
[Chancellery of the Senate, Rajmund Dopierała]

Back cover:

Metal badge decorated with white and red enamel, worn by senators of the eleventh term
[Chancellery of the Senate]

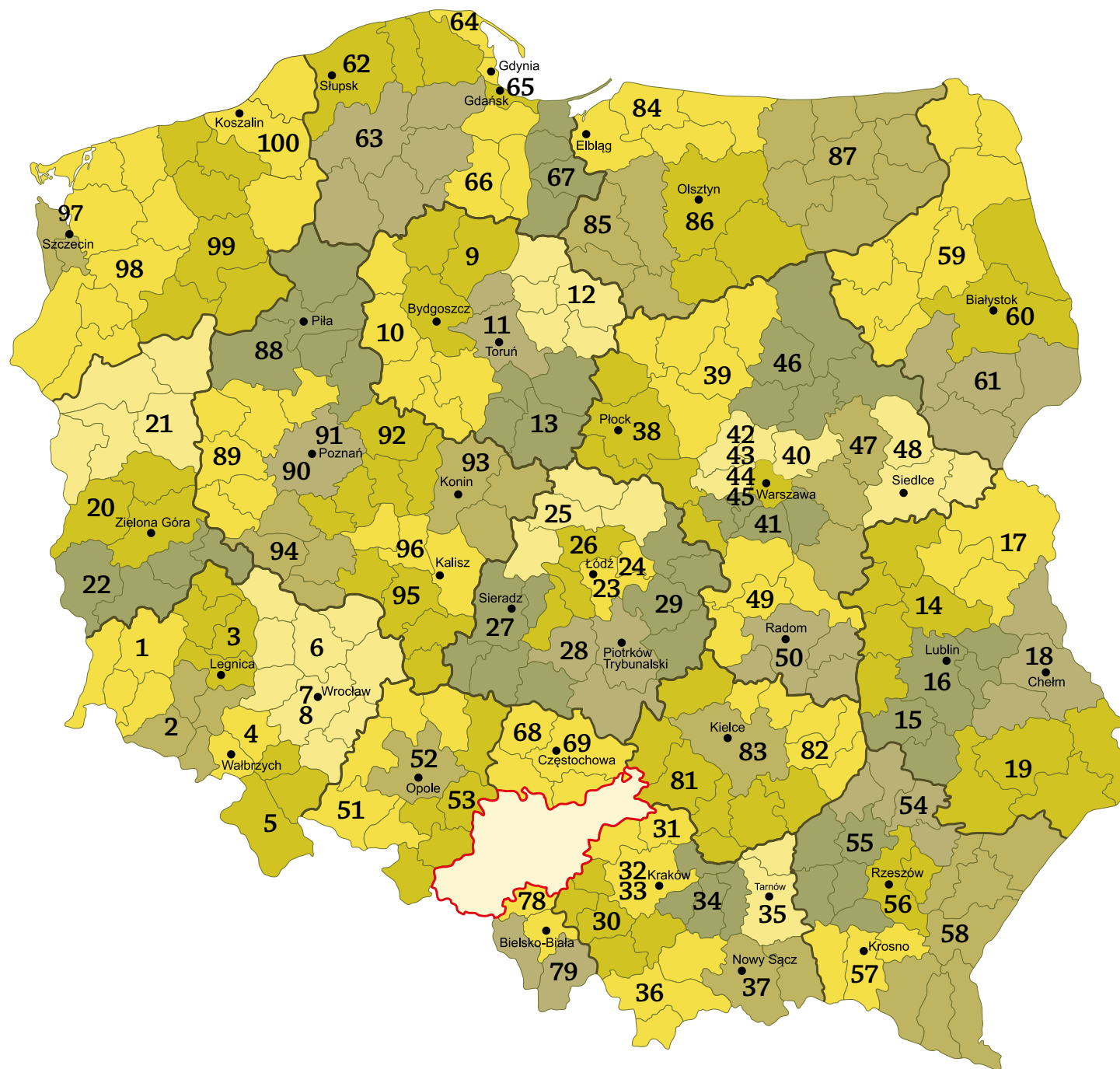
Inside flap:

Metal badge decorated with enamel, worn by senators of the Second Republic of Poland.
The reproduced item dates to 1927 and belonged to Senator Stanisław Kalinowski (the first term).
[Polish Academy of Sciences Archive, ref. III-228, item no 56]

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Senate elections in 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023. The rules governing elections to the Senate beginning with its 8th term (2011) were laid out in an electoral law that divided the country into 100 single-member constituencies. On the map, the constituency numbers and the seats of the respective district electoral commissions are marked.

