

Sejm of the Kingdom of Poland and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1493-1795)

The Polish parliament is one of the earliest legislatures in Europe. It originated from the local gatherings, *wiece*, called by the feudal rulers of Piast dynasty in their duchies (12th c). The term *sejm* stems from old Slavic word, meaning “gathering”, and appeared during the time following a unification of the Kingdom of Poland (14/15th c), when those assemblies started to represent people from all over the country. Smaller, provincial meetings were named *sejmi-ki*. Assembly at Piotrków (1493) is considered to be the first, historical sejm of three estates: king of Poland, the Senate - upper house consisting of 81 bishops and other dignitaries, and the lower house – the Chamber of Envoys (Izba Poselska), consisting of 54 deputies of *szlachta* (gentry) and the larger cities. Since 1493, the indirect elections were held every two years. With the passing of time the number of gentry envoys and their privileges grew regularly, especially after inclusion of Lithuanian deputies into the house in 1569 as a result of the Union of Lublin (1569), when the Kingdom of Poland was transformed into the federation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The gentry made up about ten per cent of the whole population and formed the basis of the army. This gave them a political power and strong influence in shaping the law and parliamentary procedure, resulting in severe limitation of king’s power. Its chambers reserved the final decisions in legislation, taxation, budget, treasury and foreign affairs; without consent of deputies war couldn’t be waged outside the Polish boundaries, no member of the gentry could be imprisoned without a court verdict (privilege *neminem captivabimus* 1425), none of the binding laws could be altered without the approval of the Sejm (privilege *nihil novi* 1505), taxes remained low, and peasant labour on the land of the gentry was compulsory. In 1573, in the act of the Warsaw Confederation, the Sejm officially sanctioned religious tolerance in Commonwealth territory, ensuring refuge from the ongoing Reformation and Counter-Reformation wars. Until the end of the 16th century, unanimity was not required, the most common electoral form was the majority-voting process. The bills were proposed to the deputies, who would seek a decision. The Senate didn’t pass decisions. The King heard its counsel and concluded the matter, although his power was restricted if all the speakers opposed the royal proposal. The Marshal of the Sejm concluded the debates, but was required to ask the members, whether his understanding of the chamber’s views was unanimously accepted by it. If anyone declared opposition, the debate would be reopened and continue until all deputies reach a conclusion. This procedure was reinforced later by the privilege *liberum veto* (Latin for “I freely forbid”). Since the second half of 17th century this gentry right was used to paralyze Sejm debates (any objection to a Sejm resolution, by either a deputy or a senator, automatically caused the rejection of other, previously approved resolutions) and brought the Commonwealth to the brink of collapse.

The Sejm convened by Stanisław August in 1788, known as the Great, or Four-Year Sejm, embarked upon the long delayed reforms and enacted several laws, from which the most important was the 3rd of May Constitution (1791), generally regarded as Europe's first and the world's second modern codified national constitution. These reforms were fundamentally unacceptable to Poland’s neighbours. In 1792 Russia invaded Poland still remaining in a deep political crisis after previous partition of the country (1772), and together with Prussia executed in 1793 the Second Partition of the Commonwealth. The national uprising under the command of Tadeusz Kościuszko ended in failure and in 1795 the final partition was undertaken by three powers: Russia, Prussia and Austria. For over a century Poland ceased to exist on the maps of Europe.

It is estimated that, between 1493 and 1793, *sejms* were held 240 times, with a debate-time of 44 years. The power enjoyed by the Sejm of the First Republic (up to 1795) was incomparably larger than that of other representative bodies functioning in Europe at that time.

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Sejm during the partition era (1795-1918)

A Polish state was partially rebuilt by Napoleon Bonaparte as the Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1815). It had a two-chamber assembly with the two-fifths of seats in the lower chamber reserved for non-noble deputies.

In 1815 the Congress of Vienna set up a semi-autonomous Kingdom of Poland under the Russian protectorate with a bicameral Sejm. The Chamber of Envoys consisted of 77 envoys from the gentry and 51 deputies from outside this class. A deputy's term of office lasted six years; half of the deputies were elected every two years, and all were protected by parliamentary immunity. Candidates for deputies had to be able to read and write, and have a certain amount of wealth. The legal voting age was 21, but military personnel were not allowed to vote. The matters within the competences of this assembly were civil and administrative issues, and, with a permission of the tsar, even the fiscal law and the military. It had the right to control government officials, and to file petitions. The Senate, consisting of 64 members (provincial governors, bishops, Russian gentry) acted as a parliament court, but had also the legislative rights.

Parliamentary sessions were initially called every two years and lasted for at least 30 days. Unfortunately, after many political conflicts between deputies and government officials, sessions were later called only four times (1818, 1820, 1826, 1830), with the last two sessions being secret.

During the November Uprising for independence (1830-1831), the assembly, having dethroned the tsar, became the supreme authority of the State till the end of the struggle. Although after the failure of the uprising the Sejm of the Kingdom of Poland was abolished, there were still other Polish parliamentary bodies acting in the annexed territories. The Cracow Republic (proclaimed by the Congress of Vienna) was governed by a Senate and a Representative Assembly (till 1846). A part of the Prussian partition – Grand Duchy of Poznań - also had its own parliament, which was convened twice a year (starting work in 1824). The Sejm of the Duchy of Poznań consisted of the landowners, town-dwellers and the wealthy peasants. It was an organ of a territorial administration. Polish territories under the Austrian rule gained far-reaching autonomy and its own Provincial Sejm of Galicia (1861-1914). It was a single chambered assembly, composed of 160 deputies, which administered the finances of Galicia. The parliamentary term lasted six years. The Sejm appointed Home Department – its executive body. Besides the activity in the Polish regional assemblies under the foreign protectorate Polish deputies created national groups in the parliaments of the partitioning powers: in the Prussian Landtag (1848-1918), in the Austrian Council of State (1867-1918), in the Reichstag of the II Reich (1871-1918), and in the Russian Duma and the Council of State (1906-1917).

Sejm of the Second Republic (1919-1939)

Poland regained independence in 1918, and was internationally recognized in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles. A several weeks later an electoral law was enacted, extending the suffrage to people of both sexes over 21 years of age. The first, after regaining independence, Legislative Sejm began its sittings in February 1919 and quickly brought a provisional Small (or Minor) Constitution that introduced a parliamentary-republic system. On March 17, 1921 the Sejm enacted a full constitution. According to this law a bicameral parliament was set up: the lower chamber Sejm with 444 deputies and the upper one, Senate with 111 members, both

elected on the basis of proportional representation. The supreme executive power was held by the president elected for seven years by the both chambers. The political parties acting in the parliament of that period weren't disciplined enough to face up enormous financial, legal and economic problems with a reconstruction of the State after 123 years under foreign rule. The early "sejms" of the Second Republic were a stage of short-lived coalitions and political crises, which resulted in the *coup d'état* in May 1926, organized by the former Head of State, Marshal Józef Piłsudski. Two months later an amendment to the constitution was introduced, strengthening the executive and limiting the deputies' powers, and the clause allowing the president to dissolve the Sejm and issue emergency decrees was added. The following decade was the scene of political struggle between the Sejm and government. The conflict culminated in April 1935, when the new constitution was enacted while deputies of the opposition were absent. The new law gave almost dictatorial power to the president, reduced the number of the deputies to 208 and raised the voting age to 24. The Senate was to be nominated by the president and the "elite of the electorate".

Terms of the Sejms and Senates of the Second Republic of Poland (1918-1939)

Legislative Sejm	1919-1922
Sejm of the 1 st term	1922-1927
Sejm of the 2 nd term	1928-1930
Sejm of the 3 rd term	1930-1935
Sejm of the 4 th term	1935-1938
Sejm of the 5 th term	1938-1939

It should be noted, that before the 20th century, the term *Sejm* referred to the entire Polish Parliament (the King, the Senate and the Chamber of Envoys), while since the Second Republic the term refers only to the lower chamber of the parliament. The first women elected to the Sejm were Irena Kosmowska, Maria Moczyłowska, Zofia Moraczewska and Anna Piasecka, in 1919.

Polish parliament during the war (1939-1945)

After German and Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939 the Sejm had been dissolved, and its role was carried on by the National Council in Exile (London). This assembly was supplemented by an underground Council in occupied Poland, representing all the major political parties acting in conspiracy.

On July 22, 1944 pro-Russian Polish Committee of National Liberation took over the power in liberated Poland, and declared that it stood by the "basic principles" of the March Constitution of 1921. The Yalta agreements (1945) provided for a free election in Poland as quickly as possible.

Sejm of the People's Republic of Poland (1947-1989)

The election in January 1947 was anything but free; thousands were disqualified from voting, thousands locked in prison on the day (including 149 parliamentary candidates), and final results of the voting were faked. The election was preceded by the referendum in 1946, in which abolition of the Senate was accepted. The Legislative Sejm of 1947 passed a Small Constitution. In 1952 a full constitution was adopted, which changed the name of the country to the Polish People's Republic. The Sejm of that period consisted of a single chamber with 460 deputies, who voted on the budget and periodic "national economic plans", as well as nominated the Prime Minister, the Council of Ministers and members of the State Council.

Later, it also chose other government officials, including the head of the Supreme Chamber of Control or the State Tribunal.

Formally, in the years 1952-1989, Sejm was the highest organ of the State power, acting on a basis of the Constitution of July 1952, practically it was submitted to the “leadership role of the Polish United Workers’ Party” and its powers were substituted very often by the State Council. Sejm of that period was deprived of a political representation or a real opposition. Only in April 1989, as a result of the Round Table agreements of the government officials with the Solidarity leaders, several changes were accepted in the voting system, structure of the parliament and the future amendments to the constitution. The office of president and the Senate were reestablished. The Election to the upper chamber was free, to the lower chamber – still with the majority of seats guaranteed to the communist leaders. Nevertheless the June election of 1989 was a huge success of the Solidarity movement. In this so called “Contract Sejm” the upper chamber was composed of 99 senators (on 100 possible seats) from the Solidarity list and in the lower chamber all available seats were won by the Solidarity candidates. During that term the Sejm started reforms transforming the country to a democratic nation and a market economy. The National Assembly elected a president, but according to the constitutional amendment next presidential election would have the form of an indirect ballot. In these circumstances president Wojciech Jaruzelski resigned from his office before the election in November/December 1990, which was won by Lech Wałęsa, the Solidarity leader.

Terms of the Sejms of the People’s Republic of Poland (1947-1989)

Legislative Sejm	1947-1952		
Sejm of the 1 st term	1952-1956		
Sejm of the 2 nd term	1957-1961		
Sejm of the 3 rd term	1961-1965		
Sejm of the 4 th term	1965-1969		
Sejm of the 5 th term	1969-1972		
Sejm of the 6 st term	1972-1976		
Sejm of the 7 th term	1976-1980		
Sejm of the 8 th term	1980-1985		
Sejm of the 9 th term	1985-1989		
Sejm of the 10 th term	1989-1991	+	Senate of the 1 st term 1989-1991

Sejm of the Third Republic (since 1989)

On October 27, 1991 the first truly free election to the Sejm and the Senate was conducted. Sejm of the 1st term passed the bill of the Small Constitution of 1992. Despite the political transformations and factional quarrels between the ruling and the opposition parties a full constitution was enacted in 1997, parliamentarism has survived avoiding a constitutional crisis. Nowadays Polish parliament consists of 460 deputies in the Sejm and 100 deputies in the Senate, elected by a proportional representation every four years. A threshold of at least 5% of votes is used during parliamentary elections.

Terms of the Sejms and Senates of the Third Republic of Poland (since 1989)

Sejm of the 1 st term	1991-1993	+	Senate of the 2 nd term	1991-1993
Sejm of the 2 nd term	1993-1997	+	Senate of the 3 rd term	1993-1997
Sejm of the 3 rd term	1997-2001	+	Senate of the 4 th term	1997-2001
Sejm of the 4 th term	2001-2005	+	Senate of the 5 th term	2001-2005
Sejm of the 5 th term	2005-2007	+	Senate of the 6 th term	2005-2007
Sejm of the 6 th term	2007-	+	Senate of the 7 th term	2007-