

Polish Constitution Day

Polonia Celebrated Polish Constitution Day 2020

Marking the 229th Anniversary of the Second Oldest Democratic Constitution in the World (1791-2020)

Poland and America Held the Same Ideals as is Seen in the Comparison of the World's First Democratic Constitutions

The Constitution of the United States of America was the world's first democratic constitution. Poland's Constitution of May 3, 1791, became the world's second and Europe's first constitution. Although Poland's parliamentary system of representative government began in the early 1400's, it was not until 1791 that political leaders achieved democratic reform of the government, nearly two years after the ratification of the American constitution. Both constitutions were drafted in secret and later publicly ratified.

Following the American model, the Polish constitution established a system of checks and balances with three independent branches of government - executive, legislative and judicial. Both constitutions stressed the principles of equality, tolerance, liberty, secret ballot and rule by majority.

Both constitutions established an executive branch, a king in Poland and a president in America, each with specific privileges and limitations, monitored by a two-house legislative branch: the Polish general assembly, or Sejm, with an upper Chamber of Senators and a lower Chamber of Deputies, and the U.S. Congress with a Senate and House of Representatives. The American vice president presided over the Senate and the Polish king presided over the Chamber of Senators, each casting the tie-breaking vote when necessary. The king and president served as commanders-in-chief of the armed forces and chief guardians of the law and appointed persons to high offices in government, such as chief advisors or ministers, ambassadors and supreme court justices. Unlike the U.S. Congress, however, the Polish Sejm had the power, by two-thirds majority of the combined houses, to force the King to remove an undesirable appointed official.

Both constitutions made provisions for change, amendments in the U.S. and a review of the constitution every twenty five years in Poland.

Also each nation's chief executive was selected by indirect election. U.S presidents were chosen by electors selected by state legislatures (the Electoral College), and the Polish king came from a prominent family selected by the Sejm. Only the House of Representatives and the Chamber of Deputies were elected directly by popular vote. Also, initially, American states selected federal senators and the Polish king appointed senators.

Both constitutions, landmarks in world history, were ultimately inspired by the principles of limited government, or shared authority, of John Locke and power to the people of Henri Rousseau.

"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union...do ordain and establish this Constitution..." (U.S. Constitution, 1789)

"All authority in human society takes its beginning in the will of the people." (Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791)



United States Constitution - First Democratic Constitution in the World
Drafted on September 17, 1787 - Ratified in 1789



Poland's Constitution - Second Oldest Democratic Constitution in the World
Drafted in 1788 - Enacted on May 3, 1791

Poland's Constitution of 1791 Second Oldest Democratic Constitution in the World


In the late 18th century liberal movements swept through America, England and France, permanently changing their governments. This movement also had a profound effect in Poland in 1791. On the third of May that year the Polish legislature adopted a constitution very similar to the United States Constitution, making Poland the second country in the world to adopt such a document. This development disturbed the strong monarchies surrounding Poland who were fearful that the liberal movement would also sweep through their countries. They soon invaded and partitioned Poland, crushing the movement and dividing the country.

But the spirit of the Polish people could never be suppressed. For over 229 years, although faced with many trying events in their nation's history, Poles and people of Polish descent have commemorated the May 3, 1791 Polish Constitution Day as a day of unity, love of freedom and belief in democratic ideals. Throughout the past 229 years, it was that endless Polish quest for freedom, peace and justice and the ideals of the May 3rd Constitution that united the Polish nation and the world's Polonia - a unity that still unites Polonia with an indomitable Polish spirit.

For additional information visit the Museum's Internet site at PolishAmericanCenter.com.



The handwritten original of the Government's Law names the Constitution of May Third of the Year 1791, stitched into the great book containing the records of the Four-Year Sejm (1788-1792) kept at the Main Archives of Ancient Records in Warsaw.

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