

The Art of Compromise: On the First Free Election and the Confederation of Warsaw

Summary

The death of the last male of the Jagiellonian line, Sigismund Augustus, the long deliberations that followed, the election of the French prince Henry de Valois to the Polish–Lithuanian throne, and finally the flight of the new monarch just a few months after his coronation—this dramatic sequence of events between 1572 and 1574 has often prompted questions about the workings of politics in times of crisis. How did order emerge from chaos? What role did religion play in secular political discourse? And why did the need for compromise ultimately prevail over the will to win? This book argues that the answers to these questions lie not in the celebrated power of the nobility to dominate but in the actions of the political elite, the manipulation of republican ideals, and the overwhelming pressure brought to bear by religious division.

Contrary to the traditional interpretation of the election as a triumph of the nobility, republican values, and tolerance, this book offers a new perspective on the interregnum in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. It highlights three key elements: the actions of the most powerful senators, the instrumental use of republican rhetoric, and the overriding impact of confessional confrontation. In 1573, it was the senatorial elite who steered the course of the interregnum—sometimes instrumentalizing the nobility, at other times openly disregarding it. Proud magnates and skillful demagogues projected the image of a united republican community, while in practice advancing their own agendas. In reality, the consensual election rested not on the republican ethos but on confessional divisions, which not only laid down the need for compromise but also crafted the form it eventually took.

1. Political Power Structures

The final years of Sigismund Augustus's reign (1548–1572) were defined by profound constitutional, social, and religious transformations that reshaped the functioning of the state and determined the future trajectory of the newly established

Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from the outset. The political transformation, culminating in the establishment of the Commonwealth with the Union of Lublin in 1569, consolidated the model of a “composite monarchy” and enhanced the role of the *Sejm* (Parliament), where the growing independence of the chamber of deputies encouraged further decentralization of power. At the same time, the spread of the Reformation and the rise of Protestant churches meant that conflicts were no longer limited to groups with divergent political interests but extended to entire confessional cultures, each claiming exclusive possession of religious truth. Such exclusivism posed one of the central challenges to a political system that relied on constant negotiation between estates and centers of authority.

In seeking to avert a crisis, political and intellectual elites drew on elements of the republican myth and republican theory. This myth envisioned a community of values united around the common good, though perpetually threatened by the specter of discord. Influenced by republican discourse, historians have often emphasized estate consolidation, political independence, and even the ultimate supremacy of the nobility. In the context of the interregnum, the nobility has typically been portrayed not as a passive instrument in the hands of the senators but as a force capable of independently organizing assemblies, formulating instructions for envoys, and actively shaping constitutional reforms. According to this interpretation, it was ultimately the nobility’s decisions—guided by the skill of a French diplomat—that delivered the election of a new monarch.

This study advances a different perspective, arguing that the king’s death, rather than marking the triumph of the republic, revealed its underlying fragility. The passing of the last Jagiellonian demonstrated that, in the sixteenth century, the monarch remained indispensable to the Commonwealth. He was an integral part of the political constellation, the cornerstone of the system of power, and the guarantor of justice. He embodied the principle of order, holding together a state mosaic composed of many autonomous elements. Foreign diplomats often remarked on the Polish monarch’s considerable power and practical control over political life. Yet the framing of the Commonwealth as a republican community, in which authority resided with virtuous citizens and the king was reduced to a steward of the common good, reshaped the exercise of royal authority. Moreover, the final years of Sigismund Augustus’s reign rendered the symbolic dimension of monarchy increasingly ambiguous. While parliamentary rituals continued to affirm constitutional continuity, the heated debate over the dissolution of the king’s marriage to Catherine of Habsburg revealed the growing influence of the chamber of deputies and the local assemblies (*sejmiki*). This controversy, which ultimately undermined the monarch’s control over his public image, also exposed the progressive secularization of royal authority. The death of Sigismund Augustus, inaugurating the interregnum, brought these tensions into sharp relief.

2. From Pragmatic Aristocracy to Confessional Democracy

With the onset of the interregnum in July 1572, the senators quickly seized the initiative in organizing the election of a new monarch. Drawing on the symbolic capital of the dead king's body, the dynastic authority embodied by the last Jagiellonian princess, and the institutional power of the Catholic Church, the most influential senators steered the course of events. As members of the ruling elite, they played a decisive role in shaping debate, directing the proceedings, and making the earliest strategic decisions—resolutions that would prove crucial for the further course of the election. By doing so, they were able, at least temporarily, to rise above the confessional divisions that fractured noble society. This did not mean, however, that aristocratic elitism, expressed through political pragmatism, was devoid of confessional undertones. Both the lay patrons of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches, and Catholic bishops themselves, could engage in political maneuvering without overt recourse to religious argument. Content with the status quo, they did not seek to resolve the challenges of the Commonwealth's multiconfessional makeup through new legislation.

The relentless rivalry among regional power centers in Lesser Poland, Greater Poland, and Lithuania meant that the first attempts to organize the royal election proved fruitless, and for several months no compromise could be reached. In this struggle, senators—most notably Piotr Zborowski—increasingly resorted to republican rhetoric, seeking to rally the nobility. The nobility, in turn, were led by established tribunes such as Mikołaj Sienicki and by new figures like Jan Zamojski. A breakthrough finally came by way of the cooperation of Primate Jakub Uchański, Bishop Stanisław Karnkowski, and the abovementioned Zborowski, a Protestant voivode, which ensured that the nobility's participation in the election was no longer in doubt. The failure of assemblies held around the king's coffin, and the effective marginalization of Anna Jagiellon, demonstrated that political compromise and republican rhetoric proved more persuasive than dynastic sentiment, the symbolism of the king's body, or the institutional strength of the church.

The shift in political mechanisms, symbolized by the convocation of the assembly at Kaski west of Warsaw in October 1572, revealed several important developments. First, it was decisively confirmed that the nobility would actively participate in the royal election, in line with the guarantees issued by Sigismund the Old, father of the late king. Second, confessional issues, which had dominated the final years of Sigismund Augustus's reign but had been muted during the first weeks of the interregnum, returned to the spotlight. Their reemergence was linked to France's involvement in the electoral campaign, coinciding with the shock of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The convergence of these factors ensured that the regulation of confessional relations not only regained importance but became the decisive issue of the entire election. The possibility of achieving

a religious compromise now decided the success or failure of the proceedings, as the growing power of emergent confessional cultures ultimately outweighed the pragmatism of the political elite.

3. An Intolerant Confederation of Warsaw

The culmination of these debates came with the Confederation of Warsaw in January 1573. Framed in the traditional form of a general confederation, this religious peace treaty was the product of brief but intense negotiations. The compromise satisfied none of the parties to the conflict: The Holy See rejected any accommodation with Protestants; leading European Protestants were uninterested in reconciliation with Catholics or radical reformers; and within the Commonwealth, the concessions went too far for the Catholic clergy while still failing to meet Protestant demands. The text did not legalize Protestant churches, define the scope of religious freedom, or guarantee liberty of conscience. It merely promised freedom from persecution on religious grounds, effectively reiterating the provisions established under Sigismund Augustus through agreements between bishops, senators, and the nobility. Yet for all its ambiguities, the Confederation was adopted in January 1573 during the meeting known as the convocation.

Whether Archbishop Uchański and part of the episcopate entered into a tacit compromise with magnates and nobles remains an open question. If such an understanding did exist, it was the Confederation that made a consensual election possible, clearing the path for the French candidate, who was increasingly favored by the Catholic party. In this sense, the Warsaw agreement guaranteed religious peace in the Commonwealth at a moment when confessional strife was tearing apart much of Europe. Put differently: Without the Confederation, Henry of Valois could hardly have ascended the throne.

The immediate impetus for the Confederation came from news of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. For the French legation these reports were a serious obstacle, yet paradoxically they also worked to Henry's advantage by weakening Rome's unconditional support for the Habsburgs. Within Poland, the struggle over interpreting the Parisian bloodshed was ultimately won by French diplomacy. Against Protestant pamphlets—arriving too late, depicting Charles IX and Henry as tyrants who betrayed their subjects—Jean de Monluc, with the assistance of Jan Dymitr Solikowski, advanced a more persuasive counternarrative: that the true danger lay not in royal perfidy but in religious radicalism and social division. The tenor of the Confederation, which avoided legitimizing Protestant institutions while committing only to the prevention of bloodshed among the “dissidents,” echoed this French apologetic far more closely than the Protestant accusations.

From the convocation to the election itself, the significance of the Warsaw Confederation evolved. In January 1573 it was a tentative compromise; by April and May, during the election, it had become the central point of reference. No new religious settlement was enacted—rather, the laconic text of January was reaffirmed and further incorporated into the Henrician Articles and into the royal oath accepted by the French envoys. This suggests that its authors doubted whether the new king would confirm it independently, and so sought to anchor it in the fundamental laws of the Commonwealth. The fierce resistance of Catholic clergy to altering the oath formula indicates that their aim was precisely to keep open the possibility of annulling or renegotiating the Confederation at a later stage. The battle over the wording of the oath was thus not a mere semantic quarrel but a contest over the long-term durability of the religious peace.

The conflict came to a head in Paris and later in Kraków, where rituals, gestures, and symbols carried extraordinary weight. To the Confederation's supporters, its confirmation—together with the electoral conditions and the modified oath—was the *sine qua non* of Henry's accession. To its opponents, the agreement remained unacceptable. Yet, paradoxically, political compromise was ultimately maintained via the "safety valve" of carefully orchestrated acts of protest: first in Warsaw during the election, then in Paris at the conferral of the royal election, and finally Wawel Cathedral in Kraków at the coronation. These gestures signaled resistance while simultaneously allowing the election and coronation to go ahead. In truth, they were neither spontaneous nor intended to halt proceedings, but rather carefully calculated moves designed to hasten the election of a Catholic monarch while leaving open the option of future reversal. The outcome was nonetheless a consensual election, in which even the fiercest adversaries ultimately gave their assent.

4. Republican Machiavellianism

Influential senators sought to frame the royal election as a rational deliberation, where superior arguments would guide procedural steps and ultimately determine the outcome. Yet the accounts of diplomats, agents, and other participants reveal a markedly different picture of the mechanisms that led to Henry's victory. French diplomats emphasized the unfavorable circumstances they faced—geographical distance from France, limited resources, and the damaging news of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Monluc, it was claimed, overcame these disadvantages through strategic communication. Confronted with the vast networks and near-limitless resources of Habsburg agents, he relied solely on his diplomatic agility. This narrative—often uncritically accepted by historians—aligns with the idealized vision of a republican polity in which communication was foundational. Through a shared language, virtuous citizens could articulate common values;

it was through this lingua franca that the Sejm's deliberations unfolded, and justice was ensured by direct access to the ruler. These themes were echoed in numerous interregnum pamphlets, which invoked the republican myth to legitimize specific political agendas.

However, a closer analysis of the communicative context in 1573 challenges the applicability of this model. It was the Habsburg envoys—Vilém of Rožmberk and Vratislav of Pernštejn—who spoke fluent Czech and could address Polish and Lithuanian audiences intelligibly. Monluc, by contrast, was confined to Latin, a language poorly understood by many present. Cognizant of this limitation, he ensured that pro-Henry texts and defenses against accusations of complicity in the massacre were published in Polish. Both the embassy to Paris and Henry's subsequent arrival underscored the significance of the language barrier—one deliberately overlooked during the election.

Eyewitness accounts of the election and coronation reveal that the reach of communication—whether oral or symbolic—was severely constrained. Speeches were often inaudible; confusion and crowding disrupted proceedings; and distance obscured gestures. Ironically, the transformation of political discourse meant that the Commonwealth ceased to function as a *Präsenzgesellschaft*—a “community of presence” reliant on spoken word and gesture. With the expansion of political participation, marked by the rise of the lower chamber and the adoption of the *viritim* principle, written and printed texts gained prominence. Only through these media could broader noble circles be engaged. Even on the election field, where disorder prevailed, communication was mediated chiefly through copied manuscripts and pre-prepared printed works.

In Western Europe, the “print revolution” had already elevated printed speeches, pamphlets, and constitutions to central instruments of political discourse. As Johannes Burkhardt noted, other media forms, as well as oral transmission, constantly referred back to the printed text as their central point of reference, shaping how information circulated and was perceived. And although diplomats during the 1573 election employed both manuscript and print, their choices reflected distinct visions of society and power. And so, the Paris envoy styled himself as a tribune addressing the noble multitude, while the Habsburg agents prioritized access to senators. Monluc welcomed the selection of Warsaw and nearby Kamień as voting venues, despite their lack of printing infrastructure, because they allowed for the assembly of numerous Mazovian nobles who were Catholics. Eschewing exclusive banquets, he favored widespread gift-giving and pressed from the outset to avoid delays in the election, recognizing time itself as a potent political tool.

The Habsburg strategy differed markedly. From the outset, their envoys avoided communication with the nobility as a whole but sought to cultivate relationships with leading magnate families, offering money and gifts. Their failure to grasp the republic's *realpolitik* contributed to their defeat. Although Chojsnin portrayed

Henry's success as a triumph of popular persuasion, his own account reveals the decisive influence of elite actors and regional power centers. Early in the electoral Sejm, the French legation had already secured ties with the most influential politicians and bishops, including Protestant leaders. Monluc also sought Lithuanian support, pledging to uphold the privileges of the Radziwiłł and Chodkiewicz families and promising the restoration of the lands Lithuania had lost as a result of the Union of Lublin. He even committed, on Henry's behalf, to marrying Anna Jagiellon.

From the vantage point of defeat, the Habsburg agent attributed Henry's victory to Anna Jagiellon's shift in allegiance, driven by the prospect of marriage and symbolized by her postelection attire adorned with lilies. In his view, the architects of the French conquest were the papal legate Giovanni Francesco Commendone, Bishop Stanisław Karnkowski, and Voivode Olbracht Łaski, who were—at least in his eyes—the most prominent magnates and influential politicians. Commendone was not afraid to double-deal—he supported other Catholic candidates while ensuring Rome's alignment with the eventual victor. This duplicity ultimately favored France.

The diplomats' accounts thus read less as tributes to republican discourse than as manifestos of political maneuvering and populist cynicism. Monluc's success stemmed not from rational persuasion of a civic majority but from the calculated manipulation of audiences. The election did not reflect a republican community choosing in the name of enduring values and the common good—it was the product of a skilled rhetorician seducing the electorate with hollow promises.

This portrayal of the election as a ruthless contest of promises and patronage emerges not only from disillusioned Habsburg reports and boastful French narratives but also from the instructions prepared for Henry prior to his arrival. These guidelines, steeped in Machiavellian thought, emphasized political efficacy over civic virtue, advocating radical measures to secure power. Yet despite fears of Henry's corrosive influence on the Polish–Lithuanian republic, his early reign was relatively uneventful. For early modern republicanism could itself adopt a Machiavellian guise, and such politics were not alien to republics. Still, the events following Henry's arrival exposed the true workings behind the facade of the nobility's electoral success. Already on the election field, senators had consolidated power, determining the outcome within their own ranks. During Henry's journey and ceremonial entry into Kraków, they repeatedly asserted their role in the interregnum. The noble-democratic moment had passed. This reinterpretation reveals the 1573 election not as the dawn of Polish–Lithuanian noble democracy, but as a moment where its inherent fragility was masked by elite manipulation and a precarious religious peace—a compromise that would define and constrain the Commonwealth for centuries to come.