



CASE STUDY: The ideas and impact of Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru is a Welsh nationalist party whose central objective is to secure independence for Wales, ideally also joining the EU. Plaid has consistently framed itself as a centre left, pro independence alternative, focused on public services, the Welsh language and constitutional reform, shaping debates on devolution and national identity.

Alongside independence, Plaid Cymru seeks to achieve:

- Economic prosperity and social justice for Wales.
- Protecting the Welsh language and culture and building a bilingual society.
- Further devolution of powers from Westminster as steps on a journey to independence.

Since the 1970s Plaid Cymru has been a small but continuous Westminster presence focused on Welsh speaking areas. Its representation has typically ranged between two and four MPs, with four seats in 1992 and 1997 marking its early peak. Between 2001 and 2015 it held three MPs, rising again to four in 2017, 2019 and 2024. Over time its Welsh vote share has grown from very low levels in the 1960s to around 15%, but Labour's strength in much of Wales has limited Plaid's ability to expand far beyond its core heartlands.

Since the creation of the Welsh Assembly in 1999, Plaid Cymru has moved from being a largely protest party to an established pillar of devolved politics, being a significant but usually second or third force, consistently behind Welsh Labour, but making major inroads into former Labour heartlands in Wales. It has usually been in opposition, but between 2007 and 2011 Plaid entered government as Labour's junior coalition partner, with Ieuan Wyn Jones serving as Deputy First Minister, giving the party governing experience and credibility.

In the 2024 UK General Election Plaid increased its Welsh vote share to 14.8%, held two redrawn seats and captured its key targets of Ynys Môn and Caerfyrddin, despite a sharp cut in the number of Welsh constituencies. That momentum was reinforced by Plaid's sensational victory in the October 2025 Caerphilly Senedd by election, where Lindsay Whittle took the seat from Labour for the first time in the constituency's history, pushing Labour into third place and exposing its vulnerability in a supposed stronghold. They broke through in Caerphilly because of Labour's national unpopularity and effective anti Reform tactical voting. Reform UK's heavy push helped Plaid rally progressive and pro devolution voters who wanted to block a right populist win, drawing tactical support from former Labour, Conservative, Lib Dem and Green voters. Plaid's leader, Rhun ap Iorwerth then framed the result as voters choosing "hope over division", presenting the upset as a sign of wider realignment before 2026. Commentators have described Caerphilly as evidence of a "fundamental realignment" in Welsh politics.

Plaid Cymru's historic Senedd election win in May 2026 marked the first time any party other than Labour emerged as the largest force in Wales since devolution, signalling a dramatic realignment of Welsh politics and the end of Labour's century-long dominance. Under Rhun ap Iorwerth's leadership, the party secured 43 of the 96 Senedd seats, overtaking both Labour and the surging Reform UK, and positioning Plaid as the main governing party, even though it fell short of an outright majority. This breakthrough reflected deep voter dissatisfaction with Labour's record in government, concern over the rise of Reform. The result not only transformed the party's status from challenger to party of government, but also opened up new debates about the prospect of a long-term shift towards greater Welsh autonomy or independence.