

**Days of Blue Loyalty: the politics of  
membership of the Fine Gael party**

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## Glossary of Irish terms and proper names

**ard-fheis** (plural ard-fheiseanna), national conference (of a political party)  
**Ceann Comhairle**, speaker or chairperson (of the Dáil)  
**Clann na Poblachta**, republican party in existence 1946–65  
**Clann na Talmhan**, small farmers' party in existence 1939–65  
**cumann** (plural cumainn), branch (of a political party), term employed in Fianna Fáil particularly  
**Cumann na nGaedheal**, forerunner of Fine Gael  
**Dáil Éireann**, directly-elected lower house of parliament to which Irish government is answerable  
**Fianna Fáil**, largest party in Ireland  
**Fine Gael**, second largest party in Ireland  
**Oireachtas**, parliament (has two houses: Dáil and Seanad)  
**Seanad Éireann**, indirectly-elected upper house of parliament  
**Sinn Féin**, republican party  
**Tánaiste**, deputy prime minister  
**Taoiseach**, prime minister  
**Teachta Dála**, Dáil deputy

# 1 Introduction

This is a book about the Fine Gael party and its members. We have been working on this project for several years, and when we have talked about it to friends and colleagues, or indeed to complete strangers, the same questions have been thrown at us repeatedly. In essence, we have been asked: why study the members of any political party? Why study Fine Gael? Those who are interested in politics and political parties cross-nationally may ask what they are likely to find interesting about a book on the members of any Irish party; those who are interested in Irish politics generally may ask why Fine Gael is of particular interest. Why study the members of Fine Gael?

One simple answer would be that information on Fine Gael members is interesting for its own sake. Given the almost complete lack of hard facts about members of Irish political parties, this study is a little like a map-making expedition by early explorers who could be certain that whatever they discovered would by definition be new information. The voyage would be worthwhile even if the landscape turned out to be undramatic. Thus, prior to this study, no-one knew how many members of Fine Gael are older than 55 (nearly half of them), whether Fine Gael members favour dropping Irish neutrality (they don't), which former Taoiseach they admire most (Garret FitzGerald) or how exactly they feel their own party differs from Fianna Fáil (in many ways or in none, as we shall see in chapter 8). Fine Gael has been the second largest party in Ireland ever since the early 1930s and it has been in government on six occasions since then, supplying the prime minister and a substantial number of the ministers each time (see Appendix D). Hence Fine Gael is a major player in Irish politics, and any new knowledge about Fine Gael, we might reasonably assume, is important and interesting in itself.

However, information on Fine Gael members should ideally have a value that goes beyond merely satisfying our curiosity about the lie of a hitherto unknown land. Our assumption in appealing to thousands of members of Fine Gael to give an hour or so of their time to this project by completing a questionnaire (as well as devoting many hours of our own time) is that studying Fine Gael should also tell us quite a bit about Irish politics. Indeed, by comparing our findings with the results from similar studies in other countries, we may be able to throw light on some aspects of modern politics generally. Put simply, the argument is this: political parties are very central to politics because of the range of important roles they play, and what goes on within political parties therefore has the potential to shape many aspects of the political process. If something is going wrong within the political parties – and many people in many countries have suggested that this is the case – then the whole democratic process may be in trouble. We will not be so hyperbolic as to suggest that a study of the Fine

Gael party amounts to a "health check on Irish democracy", but we do believe that the quality of democracy depends to a significant degree on the quality and vitality of the political parties in that democracy and that this book will throw considerable light on that.

### WHY STUDY POLITICAL PARTIES?

Political parties are essential to contemporary liberal-democratic political systems of the sort that we find across the developed world, but they are not necessarily very popular. The very word "party", indeed, has connotations of "part" and can be traced back to the Latin word *partire*, meaning to divide. Being loyal to a "party" used to be – and perhaps still is by some – contrasted with being loyal to the nation as a whole, until parties became just about respectable a couple of centuries ago and much of the odium of the word was transferred to "faction".<sup>1</sup> Even so, parties know that they are rarely loved, and some deliberately take a name that avoids using the word "party". The two main Irish parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have names that connote representing the nation as a whole, with "party" relegated to their subtitles ("The Republican Party" and "United Ireland Party" respectively).<sup>2</sup>

What is it, then, that parties do that makes them indispensable to politics and therefore worth writing a book about? The list of things that parties do is virtually endless, but we can pick out five especially important functions that they perform.<sup>3</sup>

First, parties structure the political world. They dominate governments and parliaments, which would work very differently, or perhaps wouldn't work at all, without them. They also structure the political world for many voters, who see politics in terms of the fortunes of parties as much as the fate of issues; this is especially true at election time. Individual voters don't have the time to work out their view on every political issue, and many simply trust their party's judgement on issues about which they haven't thought deeply.

Second, parties recruit the political elite. Although in some countries ministers may come from outside parliament, that is not the case in Ireland. Anyone who wants to be an Irish government minister must first be a TD (member of the Dáil) belonging to one of the parties in government.<sup>4</sup> And in order to become a party TD, he or she must first be selected as a Dáil candidate by that party. In all the Irish parties, and especially in Fine Gael, ordinary members play a major role in candidate selection. Therefore, if the members have certain expectations – or biases – about what qualities a parliamentary candidate should possess or about what a TD should do (for example, whether the most important role for a TD is legislating in parliament or solving problems on behalf of individual constituents) then these expectations will feed through into the recruitment process. The calibre of TDs and of ministers will be affected by the preferences of the candidate selectors. So will their backgrounds: for example, if the candidate selectors decide to pick more women, then there will be more women in parliament

and probably eventually in government, while if the selectors don't want female candidates for one reason or another, then there will be few women at the top in politics. And it might be that the candidate selectors have firm policy views and will favour aspiring candidates who share these views. In Fine Gael, all party members have a direct voice in the selection of candidates, so the preferences of members have the potential to make a major impact. In this book, we will examine those preferences.

Third, parties help to socialise the political elite. They provide the milieu within which the elite – TDs, cabinet ministers – operate. Politicians will often come to look at the political world from the party's perspective. In countries such as Ireland where politicians cannot afford to become detached from the "grass roots", the views of ordinary members will be impressed on members of parliament, including ministers, firmly and regularly. Politicians will not necessarily accept all the advice they get from party members, but they probably won't ignore it all either. In this book we explore the views of Fine Gael members on a number of political issues, enabling us to draw inferences about the kind of messages Fine Gael politicians are likely to hear from the membership. We will also see just how much contact there is between members and politicians.

Fourth, parties put forward manifestos and political programmes that aim to give direction to government. These programmes are not, like the programmes of interest groups, concerned with just a single issue; on the contrary, parties aggregate interests and try to come up with coherent packages of policies that span the whole range of government activity. In this book we will look at the amount of power that Fine Gael members feel they have over party policy, and the amount of power they would like to have. We will talk about the kind of policy areas that are most important to Fine Gael members and the sort of policies that Fine Gael members would like their own party to prioritise.

Fifth, parties perform what has been termed a linkage role between rulers and ruled, between the state and civil society. They have been described as "ambassadors to the community" on behalf of the party.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, they constitute the main mechanism by which voters are linked to the formal political world: to parliament, to the state bureaucracy, to the structures of government. Information flows via parties both upward from citizens to the state and downward in the other direction. However, in virtually every developed country there has been a lot of speculation over the last twenty years to the effect that parties may no longer be performing this linkage role very effectively. Some writers see parties as having become virtually a part of the state, due in particular to the large public funding now received by parties in most countries.<sup>6</sup> Others call attention to what seems to be a decline both in party membership and in the activism levels of those members who remain. Parties are accused of turning inwards and of failing to engage with society. In this book we will discuss membership trends within Fine Gael, examine the level of party activity, find out how many members are becoming less active (or more active) and why this is happening, and look at the range of groups outside Fine Gael that party

Appendix B for the detailed questionnaire). A few questions were "open", meaning that respondents were invited to answer a question – such as how they feel Fine Gael differs from its main rival Fianna Fáil – in their own words. The responses to open questions tend to be more difficult to analyse quantitatively but can be seen as "richer" in that respondents are not compelled to accept the framework offered by the researchers but can instead present their own thoughts in their own way. We will quote some of the answers to open questions when we come to discuss such areas as why members say they are becoming less (or more) active, what changes members feel should be made to the Irish political system, what steps Fine Gael should take to attract more members or better candidates, and how Fine Gael could make better use of its existing members. As we explained in the preface, the title of this book came from one such answer, from a member who wrote in response to our invitation to members to make "additional comments" that the "days of blue loyalty are over".<sup>18</sup> Whether this member is right remains to be seen.

### THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

In the next chapter we will present a history of the Irish party system and especially of Fine Gael. Here we give a brief overview of the institutional context of Irish politics by describing the most important political institutions.

The Irish political system is one of parliamentary government. As in most west European countries, the people vote at general elections for members of the lower house of parliament and this house itself then elects the government. Parliament (the Oireachtas) itself has two houses, the Dáil and the Seanad. The Dáil is directly elected by the people; these elections must take place every five years. At the time of our survey, in the autumn of 1999, the most recent election had been in June 1997, so the survey took place at about the mid-term of the government's life. It is the Dáil that elects the government and to which the government is answerable; the upper house, the Seanad, is indirectly elected and has little power.<sup>19</sup> Elections are the key battleground of Irish politics and the next election, however far off it may be, is the main focus for much political discussion and comment. However, election turnout has declined steadily since the 1960s, and, at around 66 per cent, is now lower in Ireland than in most other west European countries.

One particularly distinctive feature of Irish elections, which we have already mentioned, is the electoral system of proportional representation by means of the single transferable vote (PR-STV), a system that is used in only one other country – Malta – to elect the lower house of parliament.<sup>20</sup> The Dáil contains 166 members (known as TDs) who are elected from multi-member constituencies, each of which returns either 3, 4 or 5 TDs. At the 1997 election, for example, the 166 TDs were elected from 41 constituencies; each constituency returned about 4 TDs on average. The average constituency was contested by twelve candidates: 3 from Fianna Fáil, 2 from Fine Gael, 1 from Labour, and 6 from the

ranks of smaller parties and independents. Under PR-STV, voters are able to rank all candidates on the ballot paper in the order of their choice, by awarding a first preference to their favourite candidate, a second preference to their second choice, and so on. Voters can vote along party lines if they wish (recording a 1 for their first choice Fianna Fáil candidate, a 2 for their second choice Fianna Fáil candidate, and so on), but they can also vote on the basis of factors that cut across party lines, such as candidates' policy stances on specific issues, candidates' geographical bases, candidates' gender, or indeed any other factor. This engenders competition among candidates: not just among candidates of different parties but also among candidates of the same party. In many constituencies, a Fianna Fáil or a Fine Gael TD might well perceive the main threat to their seat as coming not from a rival party but from a rival candidate from within their own party.<sup>21</sup> Defenders of PR-STV emphasise the power it gives to the voters to determine who their representatives should be; critics argue that it is responsible for a pattern of behaviour among TDs that is detrimental to the quality of governance. We shall return to this debate in chapter 8 when we review Fine Gael members' attitudes to the political system in general and the electoral system in particular.

### DAYS OF BLUE LOYALTY: AN OVERVIEW

In the following chapters of this book we shall present and discuss our findings. First, in chapter 2, we give a history of the Fine Gael party, exploring the record, the ethos and the myths of the party since its foundation. The traditions of the party are frequently invoked at party meetings and they also colour the nature of the responses to some of the questions we asked, so it is important to try to understand how members might perceive these. In chapter 3 we will consider the historical role of members within the party. Chapter 4 outlines the demographic profile of party members and compares this with the pattern of Fine Gael support in the wider electorate, examines some trends in membership, and looks at evidence on why people become members. While members don't appear to differ markedly from Fine Gael voters, they do tend to come from families with an established tradition of Fine Gael membership; this rather narrow and exclusive recruitment pool might well be seen as a problem for the party.

In chapter 5 we examine patterns of activity: the sort of activities engaged in by members, and the difference between more active and less active members. Not all activity takes place within formal organisational structures. In general, activism levels are higher than we might have expected, and party activists seem to be performing a valuable linkage role, keeping national politicians in touch with local concerns and ensuring that the party's presence is felt in a variety of arenas. At the same time there are clear signs of decline, which may become more pronounced in the years ahead given that older members are more active than younger ones. Chapter 6 considers the impact of party members: both their internal impact (examining their views about how much influence they have

and should have within party structures) and their external impact, the effect their activity has on electoral support for the party. Members, especially active ones, do seem to be an electoral asset for a party. When we asked members whether they are content with their current role in the party, we found a degree of dissatisfaction, although their demands are not revolutionary; members, it appears, would like more involvement but they do not seek complete control.

In chapter 7 we consider the political views of Fine Gael members on a range of questions, including Northern Ireland, the European Union, the role of the Catholic church in Irish politics, and left-right issues. Some issues have the potential to divide the party, while on others there is a high degree of consensus. The views of members do not seem greatly different from those of Fine Gael voters generally. The left-right spectrum has meaning for members, and they are willing to place the main Irish parties somewhere on this spectrum, but we do not find evidence of an ideological underpinning for the political views that members hold. Chapter 8 discusses Fine Gael members' perceptions of the Irish party system. Fine Gael members feel themselves to be closer on the left-right spectrum to Fianna Fáil than to Labour, but they feel markedly warmer towards Labour than towards Fianna Fáil. Members are generally satisfied with the operation of the political system and do not see a need for fundamental change here. In this chapter, too, we probe the relationship between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to find out exactly what differences Fine Gael members see between the two parties. For many members, the ethos of the parties is the key difference rather than any policy stance; others do cite a particular policy area, such as Northern Ireland; while for some Fine Gael members there is simply no significant difference between the two parties. In chapter 9, the conclusion, we draw the threads together and consider the implications of our findings.

## 2 The Fine Gael party 1922–2002

Fine Gael, like the Irish party system generally, has not always proved easy to understand in terms of the categories into which political scientists usually slot west European parties. In particular, its relationship to its traditional adversary Fianna Fáil has been an abiding puzzle. Is the competition between these two parties in some way a conflict between right and left (in which case, which is right and which is left) or does the right-left conflict have nothing to do with their battle? Is there an urban-rural or a religious-secular component to the struggle, or perhaps a nationalist-internationalist or traditional-modern dimension? Or are the two parties really Tweedledum and Tweedledee, two peas born from the same pod and kept separate only by the dictates of history and the personal ambitions of politicians?

This book does not set out to provide definitive answers to these questions – something that would require a different study altogether – but our exploration of the political worldview of Fine Gael members will throw a great deal of light on what differences, if any, they perceive between the two main parties in the Republic of Ireland. In an ideal world, of course, our research would have embraced the members not only of Fine Gael but also of all the other parties in the state. However, for reasons already explained, limitations on resources confined us to a study of the membership of just one party.

In summary, for those who are very pressed for time and require the briefest of thumbnail sketches of Fine Gael, there are three central facts to bear in mind. First, Fine Gael was the second largest party in the state at each of the 22 general elections from 1932 to 1997 inclusive, averaging 30 per cent of the votes at each election (see Figure 2.1). Second, during the 70 years between the general elections of 1932 and 2002, Fine Gael spent only 18 years in government, always as the major component in a coalition that also included Labour (see Appendix D for details). Third, Fine Gael is a member of the pan-European People's Party group that embraces christian democratic parties from around Europe.

We will now proceed to examine Fine Gael's history in more detail. In doing this, we are not aiming to offer an exhaustive history of Fine Gael, let alone of the Irish state.<sup>1</sup> What we will do is outline the most important developments in the party's history, with particular emphasis on the early years when in many ways the mould was set. It was in that period that the party tradition was founded and the party spent ten years in office, yet it was also in that period that it was overtaken by Fianna Fáil and relegated to the second place in the Irish party system that it still occupies. In surveying the party's record, we can usefully bear in mind that all parties have their "myths". By this term, we do not mean beliefs that are untrue. Rather, the term refers to "shared stories about the past – stories which, regardless of their veracity, have helped to shape political

Fine Gael has shown itself to be a party with the ability to survive, to change, update and adapt to new circumstances, without ever losing sight of the values and philosophy and sense of nationhood, which permeated its founders, and which have inspired its leaders and its performance down through the decades. Today's Fine Gael party can look back on a lifetime of substantial and lasting achievement, proud of its contribution, sure in its identity, with the vigour, the vision and the courage to succeed.<sup>70</sup>

We will now move on to examine the role of ordinary members in Fine Gael over the years.

### 3 Membership and organisation in historical perspective

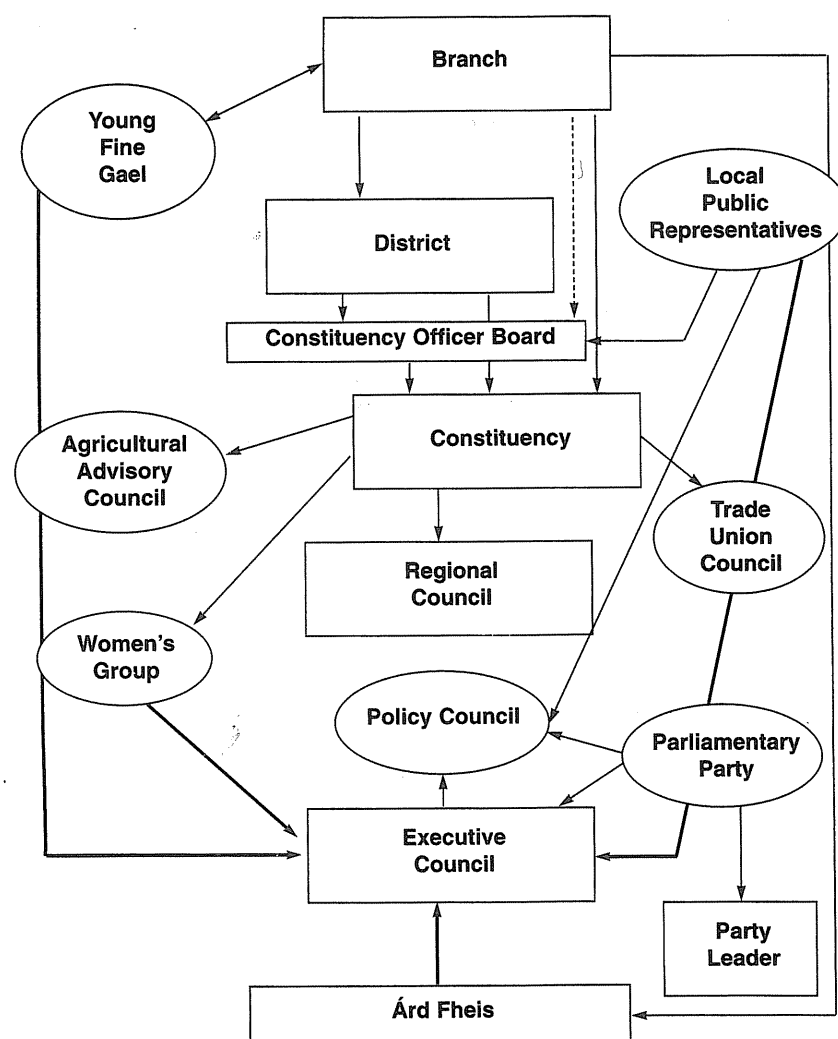
Since this book is concerned above all with the ordinary members of Fine Gael, in this chapter we examine the role members have played in the party over the years. On the whole, members have not occupied centre stage. As we shall see, Cumann na nGaedheal was created from the top down, by government ministers who were unconvinced about the need for any organisation at all and in some instances could hardly conceal their contempt for and indifference towards the party. It might be argued that the mould was set in these years. Certainly, up to the late 1970s the consistent picture is of a lacklustre, inactive party structure which occasionally a few individuals would try, usually unsuccessfully, to invigorate. Of course, a full examination of the party structure and of the power relations within Fine Gael is outside the scope of this book – in other words, while both in this chapter and in chapter 6 we will say something about how influential members feel themselves to be and how much notice they believe the upper echelons of the party take of them, we are not in a position to provide a rigorous assessment of how closely members' beliefs in this regard correspond to objective reality. Even so, in this chapter we will review the evidence available on Fine Gael's organisation.

#### CONTEMPORARY FINE GAEL ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The basic organisational structure of all of the main Irish parties is much the same,<sup>1</sup> and we outline the Fine Gael structure in Figure 3.1, which is reproduced from the party's *Branch Manual*. Party members join and belong to a local branch that covers a designated geographical area. In Fine Gael, each branch must have at least nine members. At the time of our survey in the autumn of 1999, Fine Gael had about 1,000 branches and 20,000 members. Each branch must have a minimum of nine members. Branches are required to hold an annual general meeting (AGM), and they are in fact supposed to meet quarterly, though the latter requirement is frequently not observed. There are nine officer posts (so in a minimum-size branch everyone can have one): a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a secretary, two treasurers, a policy officer, a membership officer, an organiser and a public relations officer. Indeed, branches may elect other officer posts if they wish.<sup>2</sup> There is a 3-year term limit for the occupants of any specific post. There is considerable diversity in the observance of this. In some branches individuals simply disregard it and continue interminably, with no other member brave enough to point out that the incumbent is ineligible for the position – indeed, we



Figure 3.1: The organisational structure of Fine Gael



Source: Fine Gael, *Branch Manual*, p. 5.

found that branch secretaries had on average occupied their position for seven years at the time of the survey (see Appendix B). In others, a chairperson and a secretary might swap roles every three years, thus technically conforming to the rules but ensuring that control of the branch remains in their hands. In others again, the problem is not one of people trying to hold on to positions but of persuading anyone to volunteer for them in the first place. Analysis of the responses to our survey shows that the smaller the branch and the less frequently it meets, the longer the secretary is likely to have held that position.

Above the branch there may be a district organisation, covering groups of branches in the same area of a Dáil constituency, and above this is the constituency organisation. The constituency executive consists of all party members in the constituency and has ten officer positions of its own. This body oversees the activity of all the branches in the constituency, plans for elections, and performs a vital role in selecting parliamentary election candidates. Candidate selection, as in most countries, entails interplay between local and national party bodies. It is complicated in Ireland by the fact that under the PR-STV electoral system, the question of how many candidates to nominate can itself be an important strategic decision.<sup>3</sup> In Fine Gael the national executive decides how many candidates can be picked locally; members in the constituency, on the basis of one-member-one-vote (OMOV), then select this number of candidate(s); and the national executive (the executive council, as it is termed) may then add one or more names to those selected locally. The national executive might use this power to add the name of an aspirant who was defeated at the convention, so as to prevent party disunity in the constituency organisation, or it might deliberately from the start restrict the convention to picking one fewer than the number of candidates who will run so that it has a free hand to decide how to complete the ticket, perhaps adding someone who is not a party member. In 1997 the Fine Gael national executive added six names to those selected at constituency conventions.<sup>4</sup> OMOV, which we shall return to later, was first used in 1995; before then the local candidate selectors were branch delegates, with an estimated 40–50 per cent of members being directly involved.<sup>5</sup>

Before the introduction of OMOV there was an incentive to create “paper branches”, ones that exist on paper but have no active members. This incentive, it is true, was a lot smaller than prior to the late 1970s, which is when the “model system” of candidate selection was introduced. Under this system, the number of votes that a branch could wield at a selection conference was linked to the size of the electorate in its “functional area” (thus removing the incentive to honeycomb a small area with branches), and this had gone some way towards dealing with the problem. The function of such branches was to boost support for aspiring election candidates; with candidates selected at conventions at which each branch had a fixed number of votes, it was in the interests of aspirants to create paper branches and pay the required membership fees themselves. The members in these branches, who did little or nothing within the party except vote as directed at the selection convention, were termed “ghost

up".<sup>45</sup> The implication is that members of unaffiliated branches could have as much input as members of branches in good standing. This case may, though, have been exceptional because the Clann na Talmhan organisation in the constituency had recently come into Fine Gael.<sup>46</sup> As a rule, only delegates from affiliated branches could vote at selection conventions, and the result was that except when a convention was due many branches did not bother to register with head office.<sup>47</sup> Affiliation and indeed candidate recruitment could be rather informal processes. A member from a Munster constituency wrote to Dineen in the following terms: "It is some time now since you asked me ... if I could get you (F.G.) my son ... as a candidate. Thank God, it has come to pass – and both he and ... will probably be selected at our [convention] tonight ... I enclose £1 to affiliate the local branch – so that everything will be in order".<sup>48</sup> An unsigned analysis of the 1965 election outcome was withering about the state of the organisation and the attitude of members:

Only 14 constituencies had selected their candidates before the election was announced. Directives and advice to have the candidates selected and in the field were ignored. Long delay in getting the election machine started in some constituencies because of poor organisation and slothful, negligent officials ... We must overcome overt attack as well as insidious propaganda through all media and also the cowardice and defeatism of some sections of our own supporters.<sup>49</sup>

Most Fine Gael leaders made at least a token gesture towards energising the organisation before giving up the struggle, but the first to make a serious and sustained effort was Garret FitzGerald. As we described in the previous chapter, as soon as he became leader in 1977 he embarked on a project to revive the organisation, involving a major recruitment drive (targeting young voters and women in particular) and an attempt to take constituency organisations out from under the thumb of the local Fine Gael TD.<sup>50</sup> In addition, he aimed to eliminate the paper branches. The "model system" of organisation that we described earlier in the chapter removed most of the incentive to create paper branches for candidate selection purposes.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the party insisted that branches had to affiliate to head office and supply it with details of their activities. A new, very professional and suitably ruthless general secretary, Peter Prendergast, was soon appointed – a break with the party's tradition of appointing retired military men to the position – and the number of members rose rapidly, from 20,000 in 1977 to 34,000 in 1982.<sup>52</sup> The impression at the time was that many of these new members were inspired by FitzGerald personally and shared his political agenda, one that was predominantly liberal on social issues, attached priority to peace and reconciliation within Northern Ireland, and was if anything slightly to the left of centre on socio-economic issues. Whether a discernible "FitzGerald generation" of members is still identifiable within the 1999 membership will be examined in later chapters.

The regeneration of the organisation in the late 1970s was followed by a large growth in electoral support for Fine Gael in the early 1980s, but of course we cannot be certain that it caused this growth. Perhaps the new image of the party

under FitzGerald would have paid much the same electoral dividends even if no attention had been paid to the organisation – though our analysis in chapter 6 suggests that members do convey electoral benefits. In any case, during FitzGerald's second government, from 1982 to 1987, the number of members fell steadily and the party's electoral standing plummeted.<sup>53</sup>

Over the next few years the trend continued to be mainly downwards, and four months after Fine Gael's disastrous result in the November 1992 election, the party decided to conduct a full internal audit. It established the "Commission on Renewal of Fine Gael", which was also known as the Joyce Commission after its chairwoman, Gary Joyce. Although there were many good reasons for instigating this review, the exercise was seen by some as an effort by John Bruton to pre-empt a challenge to his leadership, with one senior member describing it as his "last chance to remain as leader".<sup>54</sup> Announcing its establishment, Joyce said that the party recognised that it had not "adequately responded to the needs of the Irish people in the recent past", and consequently its brief was to

report and advise on the overhaul of Fine Gael as a party, in all its aspects (including its public image, the make-up of its membership, its organisation and its communications with the general public and the media) with a view to increasing significantly the electoral and parliamentary strength of the Party, to enable it to become established as the desired government of the country.<sup>55</sup>

To this end it would examine a number of areas, including some specifically concerned with the role of the membership. It wanted to ascertain the "image of Fine Gael held by its members, supporters, and voters" and compare this with the image held by those who did not vote for Fine Gael. In addition, it was to assess the continued relevance of the continued branch structure, the degree to which the party was successfully communicating with its own members and with the wider electorate, the selection of candidates (including the question of whether outsiders should be imposed on a constituency ticket) and the training of candidates.<sup>56</sup>

To this end the commission sought the views of a wide range of bodies, including Fine Gael members themselves. According to its report, meetings were held with party members in 28 different locations around the country, and a substantial number of written submissions were received.<sup>57</sup> The information gathered in this way is described as having "formed a valuable contribution to the Commission's work", but it is not presented directly in the report itself. The report, perhaps reflecting the fact that most of the commission's members were not party activists, was described by one analyst as not only longer but also less practical and definite than one drawn up by Fianna Fáil at around the same time, which was produced by "old party hands".<sup>58</sup> Even so, its analysis provides a significant insight into the state of the party in 1993, and some of its recommendations were implemented. Its conclusions about the state of the organisation were pessimistic, and it recommended radical change, though it emphasised that it did not believe that problems with the organisation were "at the core of Fine Gael's present difficulties".<sup>59</sup>



## 4 A profile of the membership

This chapter is the first of five in which we will present our analysis of the information provided by our surveys. In later chapters we will look at the activities and views of members, but here we will examine who the members are, how they come to be members of Fine Gael in the first place and what, if anything, are the differences between the party's members and its voters. We will start by examining membership in the aggregate, detailing how many members there are, and how much stability or turnover there seems to be.

### MEMBERSHIP: STABILITY AND CHANGE

Party membership figures have been notoriously unreliable in the past, and not just in Ireland. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that many parties had no membership lists and could only estimate membership figures. Party central offices have been poorly equipped to keep accurate records even where these were deemed to be important. Another reason is that branches have had incentives to claim an inflated membership list, so as to obtain more delegates at selection meetings and party conferences. The branches themselves have been inclined to affiliate only sporadically to head office – as we observed in chapter 3, in the 1950s and 1960s almost three quarters of Fine Gael branches were not actually affiliated at any one time.<sup>1</sup> Hence estimates of individual membership could vary widely. Fine Gael began to regularise membership in the late 1970s as the then leader Garret FitzGerald sought to eliminate paper branches and weaken the influence of incumbent TDs within local party organisations. Affiliations became regularised. The professionalism and resources of the central party organisation increased and from the mid-1980s lists were kept in electronic form. Finally, Fine Gael was forced to further refine its national membership list when the one-member-one-vote (OMOV) system of candidate selection was introduced in 1994. Much better figures are now available than in the past, and these help us to see how Fine Gael has fared as a membership party over the past couple of decades.

Table 4.1 shows party membership figures back to the 1970s. It uses estimates published by previous researchers, and some more accurate figures compiled by Fine Gael and the authors. The data indicate a rise in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, followed by a decline over the 1986–88 and a subsequent stabilisation. At the time of our survey in late 1999 Fine Gael's register contained almost 20,000 members, a little over the official April figure recorded in the table. This total is fairly typical of the last decade or so

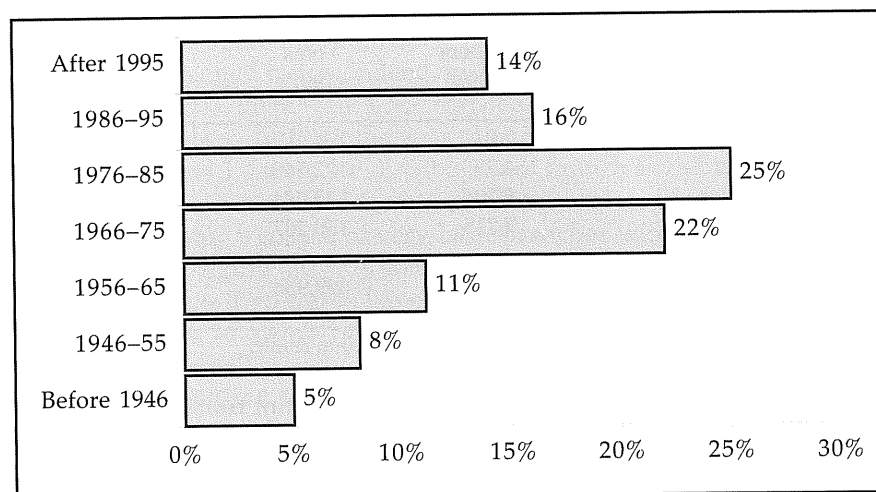
Table 4.1: Fine Gael membership figures 1967–2001

Year	Estimates of past researchers	Fine Gael figures
1977	20,000	
1978	20,000	
1979	27,000	28,529
1980	30,000	
1981	35,000	
1982	30,000	33,972
1983	31,000	
1984	30,000	
1985	36,000	30,002
1986	34,000	29,561
1987	25,000	24,923
1988	22,000	20,820
1989	20,242	19,533
1990	20,000	18,592
1991		23,456
1992		22,029
1993		18,715
1994		18,059
1995		17,132
1996		23,139
1997		16,972
1998		18,887
1999		19,232
2000		22,995
2001		23,315

Note: Estimates of past researchers taken from Farrell, "Ireland", p. 403; the party's own figures were supplied by Fine Gael or, in the case of 1985–87, calculated from information in Fine Gael party files.

although numbers do fluctuate, reaching a peak just before elections and then declining again. Chubb estimates Fine Gael membership at 12–15,000 in 1967, a figure that, if it is accurate, emphasises the increase in membership under the leadership of Garret FitzGerald.<sup>2</sup> Peter Mair's description of the rise in the numbers of registered branches, from between 200–400 in the 1950s and 1960s to 1,700 in the late 1970s underlines the change.<sup>3</sup> At its peak in the early 1980s Fine Gael had over 33,000 members, more if one includes those affiliated only to Young Fine Gael. The decline from those heady days puts membership in Fine Gael in line with the trend elsewhere in Europe where numbers have fallen in most countries over the past 10–20 years<sup>4</sup> but whereas some parties may be declining from a distant golden age, Fine Gael's high point is pretty recent and it still appears to be a more extensive member organisation now than it was

Figure 4.2: Year in which members first joined Fine Gael

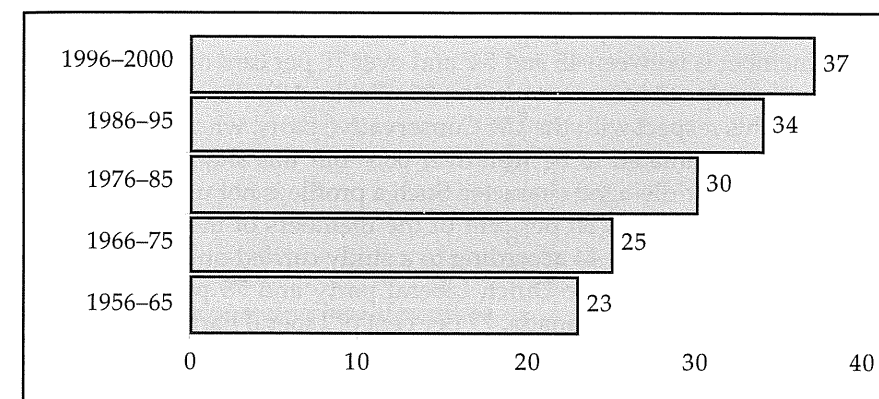


Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 3.

simply don't realise they have moved off and back onto the register. It could also be that our survey was done at a relatively low point in the cycle. Membership tends to rise and fall, rising particularly when potential candidates mobilise their supporters prior to selection meetings. As has already been pointed out, membership did rise significantly in 1996, only to fall back following the 1997 election. Had our survey been carried out a year earlier we might have picked up much greater turnover. What we find here is perhaps closer to a hard-core membership. Even so, the picture is clearly one of stability rather than change. While the ability to retain members is good news for Fine Gael, its failure to attract significant numbers of new members should be more disturbing. Additional support may come and go, but current members are mostly in for the long haul.

For many, in fact, membership seems to have been an almost life-long commitment. Combining information on when people joined with their currently reported age<sup>8</sup> suggests that many members joined when they were relatively young, some of them very young indeed. Some members wrote comments emphasising this. One declared that he was "born Fine Gael", another had been a member "all my life", and a third said she had joined in 1929 and was now aged 88 and "no turncoat". By examining the different age profile of members according to when they joined we can get some idea of whether the party is indeed ageing. Reconstructing the party at any one time-point solely in terms of the survivors from those who joined at that time is something to be done with some caution. After all, if we use the sample of members who say they joined in, say, 1966-75 to generalise to all those who may have joined at that time we are assuming those who remain in the party are a typical cross-section of all who

Figure 4.3: Age at which members first joined Fine Gael, by cohort



Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, questions 3 and 41.

joined at that time. This is a considerable and almost certainly false assumption. For instance, in this manner we can estimate the average age of those cohorts in 1966-75 to be 25 when they first joined. That group is, on average, 30 years older now and the older joiners of the time may well have passed on by now, or have dropped out due to old age or infirmity. If that has happened, we will have underestimated the age at which the average member joined. Obviously it would be much better to have made our estimates at the time, but since that was not done, and there are no national surveys prior to the current one,<sup>9</sup> we are forced either to say nothing about possible changes over time, or to examine the only available evidence and interpret with due regard for its possible bias.

Figure 4.3 shows our estimates of the average age of those who joined the party from the earliest years until the present day, using the same time periods used in Figure 4.2.<sup>10</sup> While the average age of joining is estimated at 28, the age at which people first enter the Fine Gael ranks *appears* to have changed over time, increasing steadily from 23 years old in the cohort joining between 1956 and 1965, to 37 years old for those joining after 1995. Each cohort is 2-4 years older than the previous one. However, this is the sort of regular increase in average age that we would expect from the selection bias of our contemporary sample<sup>11</sup> so we must be sceptical about the existence of any real trend in the age at which people join. New recruits may not be getting older. The absence of change over time contrasts with differences from place to place. Urban members tend to be a little older on joining and rural members a little younger. This holds for all cohorts and is probably linked to the lower tendency of urban members to have family links with the party (see below).

## 5 Activism within the party: what do members do?

Members are usually seen as vital to a political party – a perception that clearly implies that members actually do something. If members are completely inactive, then their value can be only symbolic, their contribution confined to whatever kudos the party obtains by being able to state that it has members. In reality, parties want members not just so that they can issue press statements saying that they have members – they want members primarily because of what these members can do for the party.

This contribution can take many forms, but we can start by distinguishing two main categories into which members' activity might fall: activity that takes place within the party organisation, and activity that entails engagement with the wider public. The first type of activity covers such behaviour as attending party meetings (these might be local branch meetings, or meetings at a constituency, regional or national level), giving money to the party, or standing for some position within the party organisation. The second type would mainly involve doing something for the party at elections (which could take many forms, such as door-to-door canvassing, putting up posters and so on), but is not necessarily confined to election activity, since ideally members will engage in inter-election activity designed to maintain the profile of the party in the public eye.

Looked at from the perspective of the party as a whole – if there is such a thing – it might seem that the most important activity consists of contact with the public. Activity that takes place purely within the party may, of course, be essential in order to create and maintain an organisation that is able to make the maximum impact upon the public and to operate efficiently when it's needed, especially at election times, but it is very much a means to an end rather than an end in itself. For a political party, public impact seems essential when we are judging activity, and internal activism is valuable only in as far as it contributes to enabling the party to make this public impact.

For example, if we came across a party that had lots of members who were very active in attending party meetings, donating money to the party, standing for positions within the party, reading the party newsletter and so on, we would not necessarily conclude that this was an active party *tout court*. We would want to know whether the wider society was aware of the party, and whether the party's members made any impression on their environment. A party whose members were very active within the organisation but were entirely inward-looking and focused on the organisation rather than on the broad electorate would be active in some sense but not in the sense that an outsider might think is most important, namely communicating with the public. Conversely, we might find a party whose internal organisation appears somnolent or shambolic and yet whose members manage to make an impact on the wider society. An

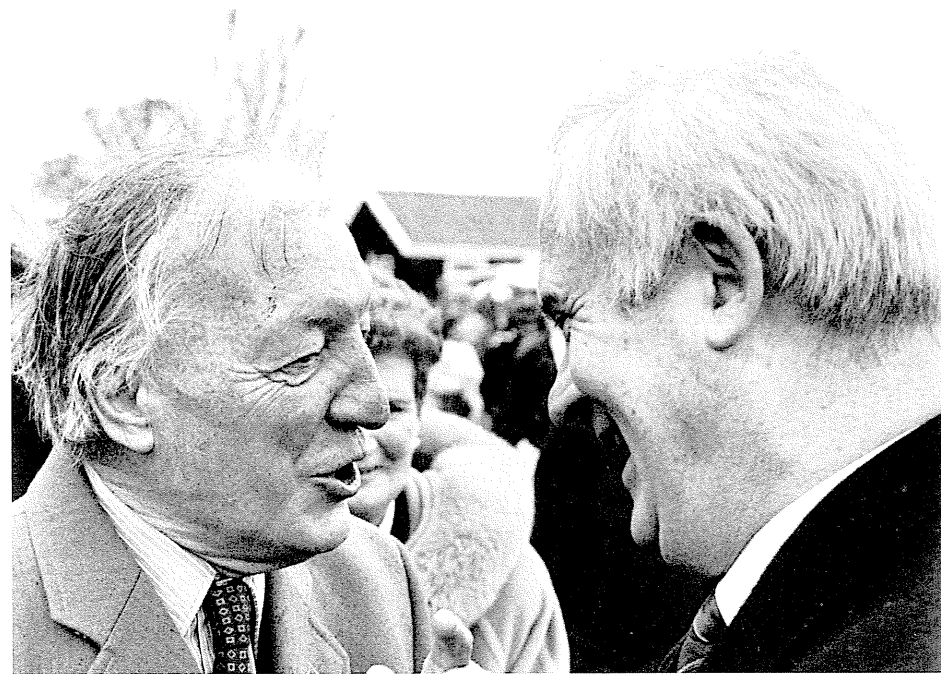
Plate q



Top: Young Fine Gael members on a training course at the Vienna Woods Hotel in Cork, November 1980.



Right: Newspaper advertisement seeking recruits for Young Fine Gael



The funny side. Top: Liam Cosgrave enjoys a joke with Brendan Corish.  
Above: John Bruton and former Fianna Fáil leader, Charles Haughey, at a race meeting in 1994.

objective observer might be more impressed by the second type of party, one that engages successfully with the public even if internally it seems weakly organised, than by the first type, one whose organisation functions smoothly in textbook fashion but doesn't seem to deliver an end product that anyone outside the organisation ever notices.

However, it is well known that any kind of organisation, once it comes into being, develops a life of its own, and maintaining the organisation becomes an end in itself for many members. This was pointed out by one of the earliest students of political parties, who wrote that "organization becomes the vital essence of the party".<sup>1</sup> In the worst case, recruits may themselves be predominantly organisation-oriented. Political parties, for whom communicating with the public is vital, will be especially concerned if this occurs – and there is evidence that it does. Alan Ware quotes from a study of British Conservative members that concluded, perhaps somewhat sweepingly, that "what all activists were interested in was not politics but organisation".<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands, the social democratic party, the PvdA, engaged in some soul-searching in the late 1980s and early 1990s and concluded that the party suffered from a "meeting culture"; it demanded such high levels of participation that hardly anyone could reach them, so the organisation had become "introverted" and obsessed with organisational questions.<sup>3</sup>

Fine Gael itself has already identified this problem. Its Joyce commission, which we mentioned in chapter 3 and which was established to examine the party in the wake of some disappointing election results, reached similar conclusions to those of the PvdA:

The Commission found that the constituency organisations have, in recent years, lost members who were motivated more by ideals or issues than political organisation. As a result, there is an imbalance in local organisations with the majority of activists being essentially organisation-oriented. This in turn has led to an increasingly inward-looking local organisation and a culture which is unattractive to people, particularly young people, who are primarily concerned with issues.

As a result, it said, the organisation

does not relate adequately to the general public or to other campaigning organisations with which it should have an affinity. The organisation, in this sense, is literally talking to itself.<sup>4</sup>

Our data may not enable us to answer all of the questions that arise in this connection. We cannot pronounce definitively on whether the members of Fine Gael, or a significant proportion of them, are more interested in the party organisation for its own sake than in how that organisation communicates with the wider public. What we can and will examine in this chapter is just how active the members are in both spheres, the internal and the external. We can see whether, by and large, the same people who are most active within the party organisation are also those who are most active at spreading the party's message at election time, or whether those members who come to the fore at elections are



who did not take part in one were less likely to take part in the other, suggesting that there may not be as many ghost members as sometimes believed. The more frequently a member had attended a branch meeting over the past twelve months, the more likely they were to have taken part in the candidate selection process (Table 5.3). The implication is clear: when members are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully at low cost in terms of time, most of them will take it.

#### Changes over time: declining activism?

One of the most widely held beliefs about political parties is that both the number of members and the activism of those members who remain is declining over time. This may be merely an unsupported generalisation, and, as we noted in chapter 3, some writers have observed that when a long-term perspective is taken, perhaps not a great deal has changed. Scarrow, for example, comments that when she tried to assess the level of party activity in Britain and Germany in past decades, the available records showed a remarkably low level of activity in the 1950s and 1960s, contrary to some suggestions that this was a "golden age" for vibrancy within political parties. In addition, the general impression of membership decline can be misleading in that the point of comparison is usually the third quarter of the twentieth century, when membership levels were atypically high.<sup>24</sup> Maor also points out that the British Labour Party had low levels of individual membership before the second world war, and that the decline in its membership since the 1970s has merely taken the party back to pre-war levels.<sup>25</sup> However, there is no doubt that membership of most European parties has been falling in recent decades.<sup>26</sup> We discussed Fine Gael membership trends in chapter 4; here we look at the evidence for decline in activism.

A snapshot survey such as the one that we carried out cannot definitively tell us about trends over time, but we can and did ask members whether they felt that they were now more active or less active than they had been four years ago. The results are shown in Table 5.4. Fine Gael is by no means suffering complete membership burn-out, yet the level of activism is evidently declining, since there are rather more members (31 per cent) who say that they have become less active than say that they have become more active (20 per cent). By comparison with the major British parties – the only others for which data are available – Fine Gael might seem to have done not too badly in retaining most of the commitment of its members over the past few years. This would provide little comfort, of course, if those Fine Gael members whose commitment to the party was wavering had simply left the party rather than becoming less active while remaining as members. However, as we saw in chapter 4, it does not seem that the party has lost members over this period. There are marked class differences in the backgrounds of those who have become less active; 39 per cent of middle-class (ABC1) members have become less active, compared with 28 per cent of working-class (C2DE) members and 24 per cent of farmers.

In addition to simply asking whether members had become more active or less active, we invited members to tell us in their own words why their activity

**Table 5.4: Members' level of activity compared with four years ago, compared with British parties**

	Fine Gael %	British Labour %	British Conservative %	British Liberal Democrats %
<i>Change in activity</i>				
More active	20	20	8	20
About the same	48	37	57	50
Less active	32	43	25	30
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 14; Seyd and Whiteley, *Labour's Grass Roots*, p. 89; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, *True Blues*, p. 68; Bennie et al., "Party members", p. 140.

Note: British party members were asked to compare their current levels of activity with those of five (not four) years ago.

levels had changed, and then we grouped their responses into a small number of categories. Those who had become more active gave a variety of reasons for the change (see Table 5.5). As we mentioned in chapter 1, although most of the questions in our survey were "closed", confining respondents to the options we presented, a few were "open", meaning that respondents could write in their own answer in their own words. Responses to the open questions are thus a particularly rich resource, representing the authentic voice of the members, and in the rest of this chapter and in subsequent chapters we shall present verbatim quotes from the members' replies to these questions.

Among those who say they have become more active, a plurality (35 per cent) identify national developments as the main cause. The tribunal revelations about certain leading Fianna Fáil politicians had evidently galvanised a number of members:

- I am more active because I believe Fianna Fáil are not fit to govern this country
- I'm more concerned with what goes on in this country now than before
- Because Fianna Fáil are such a pack of crooks and PDs as well
- John Bruton is the most honest leader
- To get Fine Gael into government.

Some members have become more active because they have moved into positions of responsibility within the party, such as branch secretary, or because in some way there is more demand for their contribution. In some cases, it is clear that the commitment has increased. In others, though, Fine Gael can take only limited consolation from the increased activity of some of these members, because they explain that they have had to become more active simply because of the decline in others' activity:

- Others nominated to do jobs refused to take them
- More work to be done, less people to share the work with

**Table 5.5: Reasons given by members who have become more active**

	%
Response to national political events	35
Have acquired position of responsibility	26
Response to local political events	13
More demand for my party work	11
I have more free time	10
Step in building a political career	1
Other	4
Total	100

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 15.

Note: Responses were received from 19 per cent of members (weighted). Since question 15 was completely open, the categories used are devised by the authors.

- Because if I didn't do the work no-one else would
- I have no choice: the few depend on me, no-one wants to do anything.

We saw earlier that for some members developments at local level had had the effect of diminishing their enthusiasm. For others, though, some local event has had an invigorating effect; for example, a friend or relative has contested an election, or an energetic politician has inspired the local organisation:

- My brother was elected as a member of [local] County Council last June for Fine Gael
- I am more active because I personally know our local TD
- A young friend has joined the council
- More active new local candidate in the area who is promising in terms of his potential
- Satisfaction gained from introducing constituents to helpful politicians, i.e. Michael Noonan
- Because we have a new TD representing us and he is holding monthly clinics in our parish, the first Fine Gael TD to do this in years. His name is Michael Ring. A gift from God to Fine Gael
- A person who was going for local election, I backed them all the way and worked hard for her because she was the best person for the job. If we don't get it right at the bottom how can they get it right at the top?

Finally, there are members whose life circumstances have changed in such a way as to allow them to devote more time to the party:

- I have more time, business is going well, that's why I'm more active
- Joined when I was 17, now older and more interested in the political world around me
- Retired, more free time, tired of Fianna Fáil government
- The longer I have been in, the more contacts I have made, and I have self belief in helping Fine Gael.

The reasons given by those members who had become less active are shown in Table 5.6. Given the age profile of members that we discussed in chapter 4, it is no surprise to find that age and poor health, sometimes both, are the largest factor in leading to reduced activism. Examples of responses from members who said that they have become less active due to old age or ill health are:

- I am retired from farming, I am 77 years old, I no longer drive a car
- Getting old, the only reason I'm involved now is that there are no young people joining
- Not as young as I used to be, prefer gardening nowadays
- I have been working for the party for 45 years and I think the young people should take over.

A close second to age and ill health is that many members have less free time due to changes in their life circumstances:

- Busy in work, haven't got much time
- I was single when I joined and for some time after, now I'm married with children
- Pressure of work but very active at election times.

Taking these two factors together, just over half of the members can be said to have become less active due to changes in their own situation, which would be likely to have led to their becoming less active in any organisation that they might belong to, rather than to specifically political factors. Fine Gael might take some comfort from this, in that most of the decline in activism does not result from discontent with anything it has done or failed to do. The remaining reasons given by members for becoming less active are all related to politics. Foremost among these is a reduction in political commitment or interest, or in many cases a simple disillusionment with politics. As we saw above, the plethora of

**Table 5.6: Reasons given by members who have become less active**

	%
Old age or ill health	29
I have less free time	27
Reduced political commitment	12
Behaviour of FG at national level	10
Behaviour of FG at local level	9
Less demand for my party work	7
Have given up position of responsibility	4
Other	2
Total	100

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 15.

Note: Responses were received from 31 per cent of members (weighted). Since question 15 was completely open, the categories used are devised by the authors.

money from members, before to general relief the meeting is brought to a close and members can go home or adjourn to the bar. While this is of course a stereotype, it may not be such a long way from the reality. The authors were told after a session with one branch to pilot the questionnaire that it had been the most interesting meeting for years, partly because there had been some genuine political discussion. The Joyce commission was blunt, stating unequivocally that "meetings at constituency and lower levels are tedious and uninteresting" and describing them as "fruitless" and "pointless". It said that it had found widespread agreement among members that "the conduct of meetings leaves a lot to be desired", adding pointedly that if the organisation is going to be truly useful, "it follows that it cannot, for instance, have an agenda that is packed with administrative matters".<sup>32</sup>

We asked respondents to tell us what branch meetings spent their time on (for the detailed results, see Appendix B, Q12). Possibly the displeasure of the Joyce commission has had some impact, since internal organisational matters do not dominate. Instead, local political matters – a term that could embrace everything from reacting to a local factory closure to discussing some of the proverbial potholes in the roads – occupy the lion's share of the time. Over forty per cent of respondents said that most of the time was spent this way, with only 16 per cent – perhaps still an undesirably high proportion – saying that most of the time was spent on internal organisational matters. These internal organisational matters ranked about equally with fund raising (also, of course, essentially a matter of interest only to the organisation) and national political matters, with in each case a small majority of respondents agreeing that "some time" had been spent on them. These figures are quite similar to those found by a 1992 study of British Conservative members, except that local issues loom larger in Ireland than in Britain.<sup>33</sup> While the sight of an agenda packed with items concerning organisation may not be exactly inspiring to anyone except lovers of organisation, perhaps it is inevitable that branch meetings have to deal with these issues, however uninteresting they may be to those not involved. We should also note that since the membership was conducted, Fine Gael has issued a manual to all its branches, setting out a suggested agenda (which lasts just over an hour). Even though this agenda is still dominated by organisational matters, the manual points out that "Branch meetings rarely result in more votes for the Party" and suggests that the meeting be preceded by a walkabout, survey or door-to-door canvass with a public representative.<sup>34</sup>

Although we did not explicitly ask members to tell us in their own words about their experiences of branch meetings, we invited branch secretaries to give us any general thoughts on the party, and several gave their impressions of branch meetings. The comments were invariably negative.<sup>35</sup> Some echoed the Joyce Commission by stressing the tedium of meetings that were dominated by organisational matters to the exclusion of policy discussions:

- Branch meetings are pretty boring and disappointing ... We have failed to attract young people. Fund raising on the agenda is turning people off
- Fundraising details put a lot of people off coming to meetings. They feel they are

constantly coughing up for the party

- Since I joined the branch here I have never heard anything discussed other than fund raising. Now that I have been appointed Secretary I have asked the Chairman to consider having quarterly meetings – I have not had a reply since
- Not enough is done to keep members motivated, interested, encouraged. Too many activities are just about raising funds (what for?) instead of geared towards political issues
- Most meetings lack direction and are badly chaired
- Branch activity non-existent between elections and conventions. Meetings seem irrelevant and boring. Would be embarrassed to introduce new members to above. No social element.

Other secretaries were even more pessimistic, seeing little point in branches discussing political issues since it appeared that no-one would be listening anyway:

- Meetings are completely unproductive – a tiny worthless talking shop
- There is a perception in rural branches that HQ take no notice of opinions or suggestions made by them even with the nominally democratic notion of one member one vote
- Most rural branches are not viable units. Too few members and same people
- Attendance at meetings is becoming a serious consideration. It is very difficult to interest and recruit new members.

Clearly this is something of a problem for Fine Gael, and indeed for all parties. If branches concentrate on fund-raising and other organisational topics, the result will be a major turnoff to all but those who are interested in organisation for its own sake or are extremely dedicated to the party. Keeping existing members will be difficult enough, never mind attracting the lively new members that all levels of the party say they want. On the other hand, if branches make a point of having discussions on burning political issues, this may not solve the drain of members either. For many members, clearly, it requires a leap of faith to imagine that anything said at a branch meeting is ever going to be heard, let alone taken heed of, outside the branch. That being so, talking about politics in a branch meeting achieves no more than talking about politics with one's friends at home or in the pub – and it may be less enjoyable. Aware of this, quite a number of secretaries suggested that the branch structure is itself obsolete, and that the main emphasis now should be on district or constituency meetings, where prominent national speakers could be invited and a sizeable attendance could be expected. We shall say more about the implications of our findings for the present Fine Gael organisational structure in chapter 6.

The branch secretaries' questionnaire also asked respondents to tell us what they saw as the most important role of their branch, giving them five options and asking them to rank these (see Table 5.11). There is a clear consensus that the two most important are those relating to election campaigning and to supporting the work of the local Fine Gael politician; indeed, no doubt the second is important partly because of the electoral payoff of this work. Discussing policy matters clearly ranks low, bearing out the Joyce commission's observation that the agenda of branch meetings holds little to capture the interest of

Table 5.11: Branch secretaries' rankings of roles of branch

	Most important role %	Second most important role %
Election campaigning and campaign planning	41	22
Support work for the TD or Dáil candidate	26	31
Recruiting new members	19	14
Discussing policy matters	9	10
Fund-raising for Fine Gael	5	16
No second preference	—	7
Total	100	100

Source: Fine Gael secretaries' questionnaire, question 6.

policy-oriented members. The views of branch secretaries, then, lend support to the widespread view among political scientists concerning the centrality of elections in political parties' view of the world. The organisation exists primarily to fight elections; whether things were ever really any different we cannot tell, given the lack of comparable data for earlier decades. Certainly a study of Donegal politics in the 1960s concluded that the primary function of the Fine Gael branches then was "the provision of support on election day".<sup>36</sup> Secretaries do not believe, contrary to some views, that the role of the local branch in election campaigning has diminished over time, swept aside by the prominence of television and by the focus on national political issues and the image of the party leaders. When they were asked whether the role of the local branch in election campaigning has changed, almost half (50 per cent) said it had not, with slightly more (29 per cent) feeling that it had become more important than the number (22 per cent) who thought it had become less important.

### MEMBERS AND INDIVIDUAL POLITICIANS

In chapter 3 we outlined the organisational structure of Fine Gael, but some writers on Irish politics have expressed scepticism about how seriously we should take the parties' formal organisational structures when we want to understand what's really going on. Some suggest that personal links count for much more than people's nominal position within an organisation, and it has been argued that personalism is especially prominent in Ireland. Personalism, as John Coakley explains, "implies a tendency to evaluate and respond to persons in positions of power (such as the President, the Taoiseach or a local Dáil deputy) in terms of their personal character rather than in terms of the authority associated with their office".<sup>37</sup> Sacks, in his study of grass roots politics in

Donegal, identified personalism as a key component of Irish political culture, asserting that, especially in rural Ireland, "face-to-face transactions are the basic mode of political participation", while Chubb argued that the values of the "dying peasant society" led to "great emphasis on the personal and local in politics".<sup>38</sup> Some institutions that look from the outside to be run along impersonal and bureaucratic lines may, on closer examination, be based primarily on personal links. For example, Samuel Decalo, writing about the military in Africa, says: "Many African armies bear little resemblance to the Western organizational prototype and are instead a coterie of distinct armed camps owing primary clientelist allegiance to a handful of mutually competitive officers of different ranks". He describes them as riddled with "mutual-advancement loyalty pyramids" that are "only nominally beholden to military discipline and hierarchical command".<sup>39</sup>

The research of the Canadian political scientist Ken Carty would suggest that this statement – once we take arms out of the equation, of course – would apply equally well to Irish political parties. Having studied grassroots party activity in Kildare in the 1970s and looked at the activities of "parochial politicians", he concludes that "the parties are, after all, really little more than these same parochial politicians with their personal networks (formal and informal) of supporters". TDs, he said, aim to build a machine whose aim is to support them personally rather than the party as a whole, so "wherever possible, personally loyal supporters, including astonishing numbers of relatives, are installed as local branch officers to solidify control". As a result, "the degree to which many TDs are able to transform nominally party organizations into purely personal machines is quite remarkable".<sup>40</sup> It is generally assumed, not always on the basis of firm evidence, that this personalistic style of politics is more pronounced in rural areas than in towns and cities. The party, in this perception, is not so much an organisation in its own right as a shell that provides the arena within which political entrepreneurs compete for support, which is how American parties are sometimes perceived.<sup>41</sup>

### Partisans of a person or of a party?

How far, then, are Fine Gael members not really partisans of Fine Gael as such but simply supporters of individual politicians – politicians who, perhaps, just so happen to belong to Fine Gael? We asked members whether they regarded themselves as being a strong supporter of one of the party's leading politicians in the constituency or whether they supported all of the party's politicians equally. The results (see Table 5.12) show quite strikingly that nearly half of Fine Gael members are oriented primarily towards a specific politician, which, at first sight at least, lends strong support to Carty's conclusions. Other questions designed to measure the same phenomenon produced comparable results. Members were asked whether, at the 1997 general election and the 1999 local election, they had worked equally for all the party's candidates or primarily to secure the election of one particular candidate. In each case, more members had been working for the election of one specific candidate than for the party ticket as a whole (Table 5.12).



## CONCLUSION

The Fine Gael members' survey suggests that activism within the party is reasonably high, especially for a party that was seen around the time of our survey as being "in crisis" and whose organisation had been the subject of a highly critical report six years earlier. There is a respectable level of attendance at branch meetings, and, in any case, it is clear that many members are in frequent contact with each other outside the formal structure and that there could be a lively organisation even where a branch meets infrequently. There is no disjunction between activity within the organisation and activity within the wider society: on the whole, those who are most active in one way are also most active in others. In other ways too the picture seems rosy. Most members participate in election campaigning and in candidate selection, and donate money to the party. The Fine Gael organisation performs a significant linkage role between the political system and ordinary citizens, with most members acting as a channel of communication between constituents and TDs. Many members see themselves as supporters primarily of one specific Fine Gael politician in the constituency, but these members are no less active or attached to the party than other members, and on balance the party benefits from their presence.

Comparing Fine Gael with the few other parties for which we have similar data also leads to encouraging conclusions. The decline of activism in Fine Gael is noticeably smaller than that experienced by the British parties. Fine Gael members attend branch meetings more than their British or Canadian counterparts. In other ways they appear little different, with many members inclined to get involved only at election time.

Not all the news is good for Fine Gael, however. The level of activism, as reported by members themselves, is declining, and it is little consolation that some parties in other countries are faring worse. Although many of the indicators are reasonably good, it is noticeable that long-serving members are markedly more active than newer recruits on virtually all dimensions: attending branch meetings, campaigning at elections, and acting as a link between TDs and constituents. There is a real danger that levels of activism and linkage will decline in the years ahead. Many branch secretaries are concerned that their branch is on its last legs, and indeed quite a few question the relevance of the branch structure itself in an era of email and mobile phones, as we shall see in the next chapter. Internal organisational matters still loom large on the agenda of branch meetings, something that was heavily criticised by the Joyce commission in 1993. As we said earlier in the chapter, the glass can be still be seen as half full rather than half empty, but it looks likely to become emptier in the years ahead.

## 6 The impact of members

We have so far described the party's membership, discussed the reasons why people belong to the party, and outlined the sort of things members do and how often they do them. Here we will review some evidence on what contribution members make to the party – what impact do their activities have? Opinion is quite divided in the academic literature on this subject.<sup>1</sup> Some, such as Katz, have argued that party members are of declining importance today.<sup>2</sup> Campaigns are nationally organised and implemented; the emphasis is on party leaders, while party images are channelled through national media, particularly television. Moreover, while this campaigning style is costly, parties have more sources of cash independent of members' contributions. Admittedly, parties still need bodies around at the right time, cheering the leader at set piece speeches, forming a guard of honour when he or she is on walkabouts, and so on. But such people can be shipped in for the day. The lifelong, committed, involved partisan, according to this argument, is a political dinosaur. In addition, members are liable to make demands on parties that parties may not want to meet. In their absence, party leaderships are freer to seek electoral favour without the ties that have bound some parties to a particular political-ideological territory.

This view is descriptively flawed and analytically somewhat naive. Despite the signs of membership decline, few would see Irish parties as fitting comfortably into this new mould. The concerns, often parochial ones, of Irish voters compel parties to campaign locally, and the importance of personal contact requires the presence of locals "on the ground". In addition, parties have always needed the funds coming in from members, even if for some politicians they have been far outweighed by bundles of notes from well-heeled supporters. Nevertheless, the sort of "electoralist" party characterised above is not so unreal, and arguably trends in this direction have both followed from and reinforced the decline in party membership seen in many nations.<sup>3</sup> How important, then, is the presence in the constituency of hundreds of members? We consider two sorts of evidence here. First, we will look at the views of the members themselves on the subject of membership. Their assessment of their own role has implications for the future of membership. In addition, their views as to how membership might be increased tell us something about how members see the costs and rewards of belonging to a party, and we will go in particular depth into the opinions of branch secretaries as to whether the present organisational structure has a future. We also report on how members see their role in candidate selection, which is a very significant arena for grass-roots influence. Second, we will analyse the party's electoral record and see how this ties in with patterns of membership. Does the party do better where it has more members, and, if so, what does that tell us about the role of members in the party?

decision making with respect to candidate selection, it tended to be directed at too much central control rather than too little, although there is a degree of support for some kind of screening and head-hunting, which might effectively be an argument for more central control.

When it comes to the external impact of members, our evidence suggests strongly that the party performs better where it has more members, and particularly so where it has more active members. The implication of this is that if the party could attract many more members, this would bring electoral benefits. The initial "cost" would appear to be the need to give members greater involvement. Of course it has been argued that giving members more say may actually damage a party's electoral fortunes, by making it more difficult for parties to target centre-ground voters. In the case of Fine Gael this argument would only hold any water if members' views were very different from those of the party's potential voters. This topic is the next to be explored, in chapter 7.

## 7 The political views of Fine Gael members

In this chapter we will explore the political opinions of Fine Gael members. How important party members' views are depends partly upon the role of members within a party. If a party attaches high priority to internal party democracy, such that the approval of members is needed for each major policy statement and decisions of the democratically-elected party conference are binding on the whole party, then the views of members matter a lot. Early studies of parties often focused on conflict between a party's parliamentarians, who were seen as keen to adopt pretty much whatever policies would maximise the party's vote, and ordinary members, who were portrayed as being determined that the party should not abandon its core principles even if this meant losing votes and government office.<sup>1</sup>

While the theme of tension between vote-hungry politicians and policy-hungry party activists has not entirely disappeared from studies of political parties, it is no longer dominant. Most analyses of power within parties these days paint a picture of an altogether more marginal role for members, whose views, to put it bluntly, don't matter a great deal one way or the other. Members are seen as being valued by the party leadership and MPs for their role in legitimising the party, acting as "cheerleaders" on behalf of the party top brass, and doing a lot of the donkey work in election campaigns, but they are not usually seen as being in any position to dictate the policy line that the party must follow.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as we saw in the previous chapter, members of Fine Gael don't even seem to want control over party policy, though they might like rather more input than they have at present.

### WHY MIGHT THE VIEWS OF PARTY MEMBERS MATTER?

Before we dismiss the significance of members' political views altogether, though, we should bear in mind that these views might still matter in various ways. One famous theory in the study of political parties is the "special law of curvilinear disparity" formulated by John May.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the theory May outlined is that party members tend to be policy "radicals" or "extremists" while the voters are moderate and centrist, so the party's MPs and leaders end up placed uneasily between the two: they want to move to the centre to win as many votes as possible, but they are constrained by the party's members who, one way or another, can prevent them moving as close to the centre as they otherwise would. The implications of this are not very benign for a party. First, it

implies that there will be inherent tension between the party's MPs and its members, with the two groups constantly trying to pull the party in different directions. Second, it implies that party members are not very typical of party voters; they cannot be used as a reliable sounding board by the MPs, and the effect of their views is to force the parties to offer policy platforms that are further from the centre than the voters really want. May's law is perfectly plausible, though opinions differ on whether it is actually true. To test it empirically requires larger resources than most studies (including this one) possess, since such a test needs data, gathered at around the same time, relating to the political views of party voters, party members and MPs.

Studies that have been able to test May's law find that the evidence is mixed. When Seyd and Whiteley examined the main British parties, they found that the pattern varied from issue to issue. In the Labour party, there were no real differences between members and voters on most issues, but when it came to nationalisation and unilateral disarmament Labour members were well to the left of the party's voters, just as May predicted.<sup>4</sup> Among Conservative members things were much the same: little difference on most issues, but clear signs of greater member extremism on two issues, namely reintroducing capital punishment and reducing the power of trade unions.<sup>5</sup> Other studies in Britain, Sweden and Norway, though, have concluded that while party members are generally more extreme than party voters, MPs are quite likely to be more extreme than members rather than closer to the centre as May suggests.<sup>6</sup>

Few people would instinctively expect May's law to apply to the main Irish parties. The picture of fire-breathing policy-obsessed party activists certainly does not correspond to the common view of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which is that they are parties with very few policy hang-ups at all, whose members are prepared to accept virtually any kind of vote-winning approach and who have little interest in details of policy. The evidence we have presented so far in this book does nothing to dispel this view. One reason why May expects members to be relative "extremists" is that he expects them to have joined the party to achieve certain policy goals but, as we saw in chapter 4, many members did not join for policy reasons. Indeed, contrary to a pattern predicted by writers such as Kaare Strøm and Alan Ware, the proportion of Fine Gael members joining for policy reasons is decreasing over time while the proportion joining for solidary reasons seems to be increasing, as we showed in chapter 4 (see in particular Table 4.8).<sup>7</sup> Even so, the members' views might still make an impact.

First, it is clearly unrealistic to imagine that members care so little about policy that they simply hand the leadership a blank cheque. If the leaders of either major party in Ireland decided off their own bat to write Irish withdrawal from the European Union, support for paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland or the introduction of unrestricted abortion into the party manifesto, they could expect a membership revolt.

Second, it is not quite true that members can't do anything even if they don't really like the policies that the leadership espouses. They can adopt the strategies sometimes termed "voice" or "exit". They could voice protest at the party's

annual conference or through other channels of communication with the parliamentary group and the leadership, at least letting the party elite know that they are unhappy with the policy line being taken even if they don't have the formal power to block it. If nothing changes as a result of these protests, they can "exit", in other words leave the party, withdrawing the free labour that they supply in keeping the party's TDs in touch with their constituents and in working at election time.

Third, members' opinions might impinge on the party during the process of candidate selection, when members might make a point of favouring candidates whose views resemble their own. If they do this, it will in time feed through into the parliamentary party and indeed the party's group of ministers in government, all of whom need to be selected and reselected as Dáil election candidates by ordinary party members. Over the long term, then, if the membership was, say, considerably more "liberal" than the TDs, members might pick candidates whose views were similar to their own, and the composition of the parliamentary group would move in a more liberal direction. Even if power in a party rests mainly at the top, those who decide who gets to the top – a process in which the candidate selectors play a large part – can have a significant role in shaping the policy stance of the party.

Fourth, the views of party members can be expected to "rub off" onto TDs to some extent, given that TDs keep in close contact with the organisational grass roots. As we saw in chapter 5, three-quarters of members have had contact with a local Fine Gael TD during the previous twelve months, and over sixty per cent say they often pass constituents' requests along to TDs. If members have particular policy views, TDs will, at the very least, find it hard to avoid knowing what these are, and they may well play a part in shaping the TD's own opinion, which in turn will have some impact when the parliamentary party discusses policy matters. Even if a TD does not feel under any pressure to conform to local members' views, he or she may well be persuaded by them. Both in this way, and by putting down motions at a party conference, members can act as policy innovators.<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, another reason why it is important to know about the views of ordinary members is that the public's impression of the party is based partly on what it sees of these members. It is true that the party leader, and after that other TDs, will have the greatest impact in shaping the public's sense of what the party stands for, but ordinary members still play some part in this. Members, as we pointed out in chapter 1, can be seen as "ambassadors to the community", and in this capacity what they say makes an impact. If members were to be strong proponents among their friends and neighbours of unpopular views, this would not do the party much good, even if its leadership was espousing a more mainstream line. Conversely, if a party is portrayed by sections of the media as holding extreme or maverick opinions, the presence on the ground of level-headed members who don't resemble the media stereotype will be to the party's benefit. Moreover, the public's perception of members' political views does not come solely through personal contact and local interaction. Party conferences receive

marijuana, the fundamental principle underlying Northern Ireland policy, the redistribution of wealth, and greater controls on farming so as to protect the environment, at least 60 per cent of members are of one mind

On the other issues, support for one side or the other is less than this, but in several cases this is because of the large number of members who place themselves in the middle or on the fence. In the case of the three issues in the middle of the list in Table 7.14, the number of members who are in favour of retaining the status quo rather than moving in one direction or the other approaches or exceeds 60 per cent. None of these issues – the influence of the church in the education system, and whether Fine Gael should move on either the left-right or the liberal-conservative spectrums – seems to have the potential to cause ructions within the party.

That leaves five issues, those in the bottom group in the table, that do bear such potential. Of these, we might discount two as unlikely ever to cause real discord within the party. The question of whether job creation should take

**Table 7.14: The extent of unity among Fine Gael members on political issues**

	Majority / plurality view	Neutral position	Minority view	Total
<i>Consensus on one side</i>				
Policy on Northern Ireland	84		16	100
Do not legalise marijuana	80	9	10	100
Redistribute wealth	67	20	13	100
More controls on farming to protect environment	60	16	24	100
<i>Consensus for status quo</i>				
Church influence on education too great	34	58	8	100
FG should move on liberal- conservative spectrum	33	59	9	100
FG should move on left-right spectrum	18	72	10	100
<i>Division</i>				
Jobs priority over environment	45	20	35	100
Drop neutrality	44	17	40	100
Trade unions too powerful	38	28	34	100
More European integration	38	31	31	100
Too many immigrants	37	28	36	100

Source: Appendix B; further details are in tables in this chapter.

Note: In the case of policy on Northern Ireland, the figures refer to those who favour a policy of even-handedness between nationalists and unionists versus those who favour a policy of having special regard for northern nationalists. "Majority / plurality view" is the larger of the for-or-against options.

priority even when this entails damage to the environment is a rather abstract one, and it is not obvious that a tangible issue will arise in day-to-day politics that will require a decision by the party one way or the other. In addition, the question of whether trade unions have too much power is not a particularly live issue in Irish politics and it shows no sign of becoming one.

There are, then, just three issues that seem to have the potential to cause real discord within the Fine Gael party, and all three concern what we have termed attitudes to Europe and the wider world, or an integrationist-isolationist spectrum. These issues – whether neutrality should be dropped, whether European integration should be extended, and whether Ireland is allowing too many immigrants into the country – tend to evoke similar responses from the members, as we have seen, in that members who adopt an integrationist position on one issue are more likely to adopt an integrationist position on the others. Those members who favour further European integration also have an above-average tendency to favour the dropping of Irish neutrality and to disagree that too many immigrants are being allowed into the country.

Something else that these issues have in common is that they are all topical and at times are close to the top of the political agenda. Decisions have to be taken, especially on specific treaties within the EU, such as the Nice treaty. On the whole, the Fine Gael party's policies are much more in line with the integrationist side of the arguments, in that the party is generally perceived as the most integrationist of the main parties and as the most willing to drop neutrality, and it has criticised the treatment of refugees by the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrat government. Our survey shows that the activists among the membership are also on the integrationist side. However, there is a large body of members, a silent significant minority albeit not quite a majority, who do not subscribe to the integrationist perspective. They may not be the kind of members who will make eloquent speeches at party conferences in support of their views, but there is certainly the possibility that they will become less active or drift away from the party if Fine Gael policy remains firmly integrationist.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined the views of Fine Gael party members. Although some might be inclined to dismiss the views of party members as of little account, we have argued that these views have the potential to make a difference both to the policies the party adopts and to the way the electorate perceives the party. In the case of Fine Gael specifically, while it emerges that many members don't have any great interest in political issues, interest is highest among the most active members, whose impact on the party and the public is likely to be the greatest.

When we explored members' views, we found that the left-right spectrum evidently has some meaning for most of them, despite suggestions that this dimension is pretty much absent from Irish politics. Fine Gael members place



## 8 Fine Gael and the Irish political system

In the previous chapter we looked at the views of Fine Gael members on a range of current political issues. Among other things, we examined how party members place Fine Gael and the other parties on the left-right spectrum, which gives us some idea of the way in which they visualise the Irish party system. In this chapter we will explore this in more detail, analysing Fine Gael members' preferences when it comes to coalition partners and relating this to how warmly they feel towards the other parties. We will be able to ascertain whether there is significant disagreement among the membership over coalition strategy, and, if so, whether this is related to other differences within the party, such as those distinguishing more left-wing from more right-wing members or more liberal from more conservative members. More generally, we will assess members' expectations regarding Fine Gael's future prospects – are members upbeat or demoralised? We also examine their opinions as to whether Fine Gael should consider merging with any other party, and their views on one of the thorniest questions about Irish politics: just what is the difference between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil? We look at Fine Gael members' assessments of a range of current and past political figures from north and south of the border. Lastly, we discuss Fine Gael members' views on how well the political system as a whole is functioning and how, if at all, it could be improved.

### MEMBERS' FEELINGS TOWARDS THE IRISH POLITICAL PARTIES

We wished to explore the way Fine Gael members perceive the Irish party system – by this term, we mean the individual parties along with the way in which these parties relate to and interact with each other. In order to do this, we asked a number of questions concerning several different topics. One of these was coalition, which we discuss in greater depth in the next section. In this section we shall focus on the extent to which Fine Gael members feel close to or distant from the various political parties. We shall then go on to examine the way members identify the difference between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

#### Fine Gael and the Irish party system

To assess how Fine Gael members felt about the various parties, we asked them to tell us where they would place the parties on a "thermometer" scale running from 0 to 99. We explained that if they felt warm and sympathetic toward a party they should give it a score of over 50; if they felt cold and unsympathetic they should give a score of less than 50; and if they felt neither cold nor warm they

should give a score of precisely 50.

The results, which are shown in Table 8.1, contain a number of notable features. We could feel completely confident even without conducting a survey that Fine Gael would prove to be the favourite party of Fine Gael members, and so it is, but the rankings of the other parties were less predictable. As we saw in the previous chapter, Fine Gael members place Fianna Fáil closest to themselves on the left-right spectrum, with the PDs next closest and Labour furthest away. However, when it comes to political alliances, Labour has been a frequent coalition partner and Fianna Fáil has always been on the opposite side. The PDs stand somewhere in between: pre-election allies, implicit or explicit, on occasion but never coalition partners and, at the time of our survey, in coalition with Fianna Fáil while Fine Gael was in opposition. Hence if members' feelings of warmth or coolness were determined primarily by the left-right spectrum we would expect them to rank Fianna Fáil above the PDs and the PDs above Labour, while if these feelings were determined primarily by the pattern of party competition, we would expect Labour to be ranked ahead of the PDs, who in turn would be ranked ahead of Fianna Fáil.

Table 8.1 shows that the lines of battle count for more than the left-right spectrum. Fine Gael members' second favourite party is Labour, whose average score was 50, just about the mid-point of the scale. The PDs came next, and Fianna Fáil was only fourth, with most Fine Gael members giving it a score of 40 or less. It is striking that these three parties all scored higher than the minor parties about which we asked. It is no surprise that Fine Gael members rated Sinn Féin very low (in fact 58 per cent gave it a score of 10 or below, with 17 per cent giving it a score of zero, indicating complete rejection of the party and what it is perceived to stand for). Less foreseeably, Fine Gael members had a negative view of the Greens, who were rated less favourably than Fianna Fáil. This is especially surprising given that, first, the Greens were widely seen at the time as a likely coalition partner in any Fine Gael-led coalition government that might

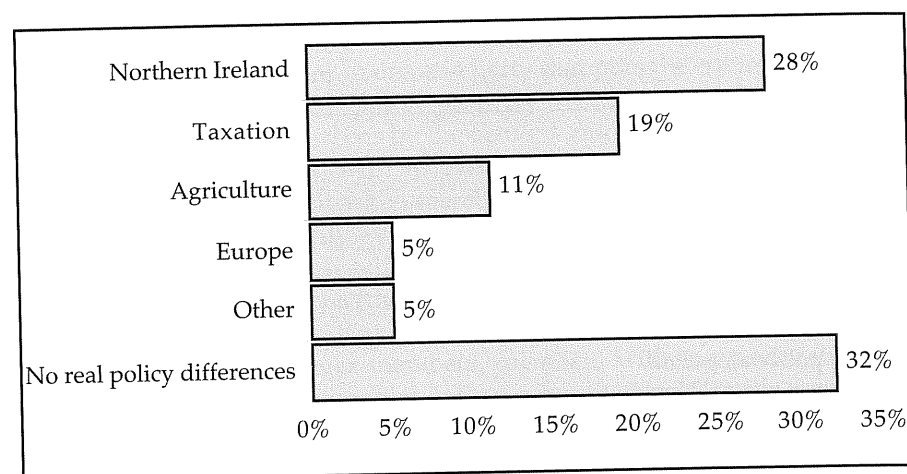
**Table 8.1: Fine Gael members' warmth or coldness towards the political parties**

Party	Average score	% of FG members who give party a score of				
		0–19	20–39	40–59	60–79	80–99
Fine Gael	76	4	1	8	29	57
Labour	50	8	10	42	34	6
Progressive Democrats	40	19	20	37	19	5
Fianna Fáil	34	28	22	37	11	3
Green Party	31	35	23	28	12	2
Sinn Féin	19	60	20	15	5	1

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, questions 98 to 103.

Note: The maximum score is 99, denoting a very positive feeling, and the minimum is 0, indicating a very negative feeling.

Figure 8.1: Policy area in which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael differ most



Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 86

Members' own situation had an impact on their perception: for example, 20 per cent of farmers identified agriculture as the main issue that divided the parties while only 4 per cent of middle-class members gave this response. The categories are broad, and from this question alone we cannot be sure what the responses mean: for example, two members answering "taxation" might have different specific issues in mind, and two members answering "Northern Ireland" might have different views as to which party's policy is better.

Our second question was designed to overcome this problem by giving members the chance to express their views in their own way. The responses, shown in Table 8.5, show that the great majority of members, when asked about the main difference between their party and Fianna Fáil, do not cite a policy area at all.

Far and away the most common factor mentioned is something to do with honesty and integrity, which has often been cited as the Achilles heel of Fianna Fáil; as the former Fianna Fáil government press secretary Seán Duignan puts it, the high moral ground is "traditionally treacherous terrain for Fianna Fáil".<sup>4</sup> Examples of members' responses in this category are:

- Fine Gael are honest, Fianna Fáil are completely dishonest
- Fine Gael are a much more honest party, otherwise not much difference
- Fine Gael are decent people and are generally seen as such, Fianna Fáil are very definitely not
- I regard Fine Gael as an honourable party and Fianna Fáil as a crowd of chancers! That is why I joined Fine Gael
- Fianna Fáil are a crowd of crooks and Fine Gael are honest men [sic]
- Fine Gael set the wheels of the new state in motion, we founded the state, we are a party of the highest integrity and standards

Table 8.5: Fine Gael members' perception of main differences between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael

	Percentage citing as main difference
Integrity, honesty	48
No difference	12
Fianna Fáil is more active, better organised	10
Civil war legacy / Northern Ireland	9
Fine Gael puts country first, Fianna Fáil populist and will do anything to get votes	6
Position on left-right dimension	3
Position on liberal-conservative dimension	1
Fine Gael modern and progressive, Fianna Fáil is backward-looking	1
EU / neutrality	1
Other policy area	2
Miscellaneous other	8
Total	100

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 87: "Now please tell us in your own words what you feel is the main difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael today".

Note: Responses were received from 75 per cent of members (weighted). Since question 87 was completely open, the categories used are devised by the authors.

- Fine Gael has members with breeding and intelligence and ethics, in Fianna Fáil these are extreme rarities and it seems not to be found in the Dáil
- The type of people in Fine Gael are generally a more honourable sort than the sleaze types in Fianna Fáil.

It is tempting to ascribe these views to the variety of enquiries under way at the time of our survey into allegations of corruption or impropriety on the part of leading Fianna Fáil figures such as Charles Haughey and Ray Burke. However, it may well be that this pattern was by no means specific to 1999. When Tom Garvin undertook a small-scale survey of party activists in Dublin South-Central in 1972-73 and asked members of each party what they liked or disliked about the main parties, he found that the activist layer of Fine Gael "tended to emphasise the virtue of its leaders and prided itself on its honesty and integrity, sometimes contrasting this integrity with the alleged corruption of Fianna Fáil. Fine Gael was the party of justice and honour, and it had a stated policy programme to which it would adhere if it were to come to office". He summarises the party's sub-culture as "moralist".<sup>5</sup>

What was striking in our 1999 survey was the number of Fine Gael members who, even while citing integrity as the most important factor distinguishing the two parties, felt that their own party was only marginally better than Fianna Fáil, or expressed hope rather than confidence that the two parties really were significantly different:

- I would like to think that in Fine Gael we have a party we can trust
- Most of Fine Gael TDs are honest
- Fine Gael appear to be more honest
- Fine Gael are hopefully more honest
- Fine Gael are honest (with a few exceptions)
- Leadership of Fine Gael more honest and decent (can't say the same for all Fine Gael TDs)
- Fianna Fáil have hidden a lot under the carpet, Fine Gael are a small bit more honest about it
- I would like to hope that Fine Gael is a more moral party than Fianna Fáil
- Some semblance of decency and honesty appears to still exist in Fine Gael, whereas Fianna Fáil seems to be totally riddled with corruption and deceit
- Crooks versus half-honest crooks
- The Fine Gael party appears to be more honest than Fianna Fáil but maybe that is because they haven't been in power as long as Fianna Fáil.

After those members who see integrity as the main distinguishing factor, the second most common response (given by 12 per cent) to the question as to the main difference between the parties was simply that there is no difference. Many of the comments in this category are ones that we might expect to come from disaffected non-partisans rather than from paid-up members of one of the two parties:

- I really could not say as I have lost faith in both parties, I think it is all about themselves
- I think both are nearly the same and I see no reason why they would not get together and form a government
- I asked my own branch that very question – they couldn't give me an answer
- Very little really, as both are not doing much for PAYE and poverty at the moment
- Don't know
- None – they all do the same thing when in power
- There is not a lot of difference. I would not know enough about the policies of either party to make a judgement call on this issue
- There is no real difference apart from they all feather their own nest
- In essence very little difference, just the type of person / people attracted to the different parties
- To be really honest not a big difference, it was a sad day when this split came in our country
- I really don't have an opinion, I go more for personalities; local Fine Gael rep is superb and always has been
- There probably isn't a lot of difference, when are they ever going to do anything for the ordinary person like me?
- None whatsoever.

The third most common response (given by 10 per cent) to the question, perhaps surprisingly, was provided by those members who contrasted Fianna Fáil favourably with their own party and suggested that Fine Gael had a lot to learn from its larger rival. Some members suggested that Fianna Fáil

communicates better with the public than Fine Gael does:

- Very little difference except Fianna Fáil more pushy, speak out more, appear in local radio and local meetings, always making their presence felt
- Just to say Fianna Fáil appear to be the better of the two today. The country seems to be fine at the moment
- When Fianna Fáil make dodgy policies they seem to escape criticism. When Fine Gael do similar they lose out which is an area for improvement
- No difference except Fianna Fáil has a leader and Fine Gael has none
- Fianna Fáil is more professional in appealing to the wider audience while Fine Gael seem only capable of appealing to the professional and wealthy classes
- Fine Gael appears inactive – says little, silent on issues including scandals, no mention of Fine Gael policy position
- Fianna Fáil have much stronger candidates than Fine Gael in every area
- Fianna Fáil very involved in local committees and often seem to have access to money to pay activists
- Fianna Fáil make it happen, Fine Gael let it happen. Fianna Fáil want to be in power all the time
- Fianna Fáil are more in touch with the ordinary folk
- Fianna Fáil are much more conservative in expressing their views, unlike Fine Gael they do not show their hand and think afterwards, some Fine Gael pronouncements over the years have been disastrous
- Fianna Fáil have the best organisation machine for winning elections
- Fianna Fáil better able to communicate with public, Fine Gael needs to be more approachable to ordinary voters
- Fianna Fáil are more in touch with grassroots politics, their leader is on top of the world, after all the scandal. What does that say about Fine Gael?
- Fianna Fáil are better at getting their message across and their TDs are better at working at local level
- Fianna Fáil was and is inherently corrupt. However, it is better organised and appeals to more people. Its policies are basically the same as Fine Gael on most issues yet Fine Gael is seen as aloof to voters and party members alike
- Fine Gael honest and ineffective, Fianna Fáil still corrupt but effective.

Many of the members in this category speak about a lack of contact with party TDs (there are echoes here of the kind of complaint heard in earlier decades, which we mentioned in chapters 3 and 6) and sometimes draw a contrast with what they believe the situation to be in Fianna Fáil. In Fine Gael, some respondents feel, members are less appreciated and, perhaps in consequence, less committed:

- Fine Gael not much good at standing up to Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil listen to members better
- If Fine Gael gave as much support and attention to its members (and not just the chosen few) as Fianna Fáil do we would be as strong if not stronger than Fianna Fáil
- Fianna Fáil party machine is much better than ours, we are lacking in commitment – with Fianna Fáil the party always comes first, not so with Fine Gael. Some older members get angry when ministers do not get them favours and can be very disruptive at election time when branch members are trying to

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined Fine Gael members' perception of the political and party systems. We found that members have a view of the political world in which Labour is regarded sympathetically while other parties are viewed coolly, with the smaller parties being rated lowest of all. When it comes to government formation, the great majority of Fine Gael members do not wish to go into a coalition with anyone other than Labour, and they are especially hostile to the idea of a coalition with Fianna Fáil. Nevertheless, one in five would be prepared to contemplate a merger with Fianna Fáil at some stage in the future, and most would welcome a merger with the PDs. Fine Gael members seem fairly positive about the party's future, with widespread optimism that the long-awaited day when Fine Gael will overtake Fianna Fáil is less than twenty years away – though, perhaps worryingly, it is the oldest members who are most likely to believe this. Analysis of members' evaluations of current and former politicians largely reflects attitudes to these politicians' parties. There are some signs that liberal members have a different perspective from that of conservative members, and pro-European integration members from that of anti-integration members, but these differences are not so strong that we can talk realistically of distinct ideological groups within the party.

On the whole members are, or were when we conducted the survey, fairly satisfied with the performance of the political system. There is general support for certain suggested reforms, such as reducing the power of the government *vis-à-vis* the Dáil or enhancing the power of local government, but on balance there is opposition to changing the PR-STV electoral system. For the most part, members do not really feel there is a problem that needs to be solved here, and, in their view, while there may be minor adjustments or improvements to be made, the system generally does not need a fundamental overhaul. What many of them wish to see above all is a more honest, positive and constructive spirit in Irish politics.

## 9 Conclusion

What have we learned from surveying the membership of Fine Gael? In this final chapter we will review our main findings and consider what their implications are, for Fine Gael specifically and perhaps for political parties generally.

## THE MAIN FINDINGS

Let us first summarise and reiterate some of the lessons to be drawn from earlier chapters. In chapter 3 we examined the role of membership in Fine Gael over the years and observed that the party was based largely on Cumann na nGaedheal, which was created in 1923 in a "top-down" way by members of parliament. There is an influential theory in political science that holds that members will always be more marginal in a party that came into existence this way than in one founded from the bottom up, and certainly in Cumann na nGaedheal the party organisation was unable to constrain ministers in any significant way. Some ministers, indeed, seemed to have a degree of disdain for their party and did not believe it had any valid role except to support uncritically whatever its leaders decided to do. In addition, and not necessarily in consequence, the pro-Treaty parties had difficulty from the start in attracting members and election candidates, and their organisation was always characterised as far less effective and dynamic than that of their rival, Fianna Fáil. Fine Gael was not, then, a party in which the members initially occupied centre stage and, with the possible exception of the first six or so years of Garret FitzGerald's leadership, there has been no golden age of internal party democracy or activity that can act as a yardstick or a beacon when the extent of membership involvement and activity today are discussed.

In chapter 4 we presented our findings about the backgrounds of Fine Gael members. Members are predominantly male and middle-aged; in urban areas they are mainly middle-class, but in rural areas there are more working-class members and, of course, many more farmers. Indeed, almost a third of Fine Gael members are farmers, and 29 per cent of members belong to a farmers' interest group, something that must inevitably have an impact on the kind of policies the party adopts towards the agricultural sector. Quite a high proportion of members joined the party for essentially non-political reasons, such as a desire to enhance their social life or as a result of the influence of family or friends. These members tend to be relatively uninterested in policy questions. The longevity of members is striking: about half have been members since before Garret FitzGerald became leader in 1977, and a quarter have been members since before Liam Cosgrave became leader in 1965. This indicates an impressive



degree of loyalty, but it also points to the paucity of new, young members. Another striking aspect is that 63 per cent of members report that one or both of their parents were also party members, and 75 per cent come from families with a tradition of supporting the party that goes back to the treaty split eighty years ago. The party may be doing well in drawing on the loyalty of the pro-Treaty tradition, but it has evidently not been very successful in reaching out beyond that tradition.

In chapter 5 we attempted to assess just how active these members are. There seems to be more grassroots activity than some gloomy assessments, of Fine Gael and of political parties generally, might have led us to expect. Branches meet on average about three times a year, with an average of 11 members at each meeting, and over 80 per cent of members have been to at least one such meeting in the past year. Moreover, the organisation does not seem to be "inward-looking" or "talking to itself", conclusions reached by a commission that examined the party organisation in 1993 – in fact we find plenty of evidence of activity at and around elections, which after all involves communicating with the wider public. Nearly three-quarters of members had taken part in election campaigning in the previous four years, most had participated directly in candidate selection, and most fill a linkage role between citizens and the state by passing constituents' requests to a party TD. However, when we asked members whether they were becoming more active or less active over time, the results showed that on balance the membership is becoming less active. Not surprisingly, in the light of our findings in chapter 4, a major cause of this is old age or ill health, and given the low number of young members there is cause for concern for the party here. We explored the question of whether members were for the most part loyal to the party or loyal to an individual politician within the party. Nearly half of the members describe themselves as strong supporters of one local Fine Gael politician in particular, but we concluded that the party is able to harness these personal links rather than being weakened by them.

In chapter 6 we reported the views of members about how the party treats them. As in any large organisation, there are plenty of complaints: members want to be listened to more, to be told more about what's going on, and to be more involved. There are fewer complaints about candidate selection, which is significant as this is the area where party rules give members most input. Members are agreed that the party needs more members, especially more women and young members, but when they are asked how it should go about achieving this, very few accept that it is primarily the members' own responsibility to recruit. Instead, most have suggestions as to what someone else in the party, usually head office or public representatives, should do. Most members, too, are against introducing quotas for women among election candidates, though female members are (just) in favour. When we sought the views of branch secretaries specifically, we found that, notwithstanding the generally healthy picture we found when we asked about members' activity, a number report that their own branch is heading for extinction. Some secretaries go

further and call into question the need for a branch structure in the twenty-first century. We also attempted to gauge the electoral impact of members, and reached the clear conclusion that members make a difference. Active members make most difference of all and, subject to the qualifications that must always be made about such an exercise, we estimate that each additional active member adds an extra 10 votes to the Fine Gael total, with an additional 100 active members adding around 5 per cent to Fine Gael's vote in a constituency.

In chapter 7 we discussed the political views of the members. Some of the findings were striking in themselves: the overwhelming preference for an even-handed approach towards the two communities in Northern Ireland, the vehement opposition to the idea of legalising marijuana, and the lack of enthusiasm for further European integration or for dropping Irish neutrality. There is scope for division within the party over the last two issues. When we compare the views of members with those of Fine Gael voters we find very little difference, contrary to the views of those researchers who have theorised that members are likely to be policy "extremists" compared with the more moderate voters. We asked Fine Gael members to place themselves on the left-right spectrum, and found that the great majority place themselves in the centre or on the right. However, members' self-placement on this scale seems to have little bearing on their attitudes to specific policy issues; there is no evidence here of an ideological underpinning for the opinions held, or of a structure in the attitudes that would enable us to speak of distinct groups, such as "liberals" and "conservatives", defined by different ideologies, among the Fine Gael members.

We also asked members to place the main Irish parties on the left-right spectrum, and this revealed that members collectively situate Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in virtually identical positions. In chapter 8 we returned to the comparison between these two parties, and found that when Fine Gael members are asked directly to identify the main difference, the most common answer given is: integrity. Many Fine Gael members do not appear to believe that there are any great policy differences, but they do feel strongly that, as one member put it, "Fine Gael are honest, Fianna Fáil are completely dishonest". Yet, when we asked members about the prospect of a merger with Fianna Fáil, a remarkable 19 per cent said they would favour the idea – though, pending this unlikely event, feeling in the meantime is strongly against entering coalition with that party. Members generally seem quite optimistic about the party's future electoral prospects, though it is the older members who are most optimistic, and this optimism has to be set beside some of the pessimistic reports from branch secretaries that we encountered in chapter 6. We also examined members' evaluations of current and former politicians – John Hume and Garret FitzGerald were by some way the most popular – and of the main parties, which revealed that while Fine Gael is (of course) viewed positively and Labour neutrally, all other parties are seen in a negative light. We asked members to assess the functioning of the Irish political system, and found that on the whole they are satisfied with it – they are in favour of strengthening local government but against changing the electoral system.

## Appendix A: How the sample was constructed

This study uses the methodology of the large-scale sample survey. This has been employed to examine party members in many countries, most notably in Britain where surveys of the Labour and Conservative parties have served to undermine much of the conventional wisdom about each of them. The survey of Fine Gael members that we describe in this book was carried out at the end of 1999. Fine Gael is well set up for such a study because it maintains a national database of members that includes each member's name and address and the branch the member belongs to. This allows a national random sample to be selected with minimal difficulty. Here we explain the methodology and discuss some limitations of the data.

We first separated the 1,410 local branch secretaries from 18,542 other members so as to sample the two separately. This was done largely because we wanted to ask secretaries questions about their branch and for this exercise to be useful it required a much larger sample of secretaries than we would expect to obtain by chance. We also assumed that secretaries would be more likely to respond and wanted to ensure a reasonable sample size (this assumption was correct, though the difference in responses rates was minor, as Table A1 shows). We selected a simple random sample of 1,009 secretaries and 2,610 other members using the random sampling procedure in Data Desk 5.0. Leaving aside a small number of Dáil deputies selected in this way, we sent each individual a questionnaire (see Appendix B for this) along with a pre-paid envelope for returning it. We included an additional short questionnaire (also in Appendix B) in the mailing to secretaries. This was done at the start of October 1999. We followed this up with a postcard reminder a month later, and a further reminder and replacement questionnaire a month later again. Each mailing was spread out over several days for logistical reasons. Eventually, as Table A1 shows, 1,719 usable questionnaires were returned, 523 from those sampled as branch secretaries and 1,196 from other members. This is an overall response rate of over 47 per cent.

This was achieved largely before the end of 1999. In fact, 33 per cent of questionnaires came back in the first three weeks after posting, and 86 per cent were returned before the end of November with almost all remaining questionnaires returned before New Year's day 2000 (week 12). The remaining 4 per cent dribbled in over the next several weeks. Both the first postcard, and to a lesser extent the second questionnaire, led to a spurt in responses following declining numbers. Figure A1 shows the proportion of responses, week by week from 11 October 1999 until the end of February 2000, after which only four

Table A1: Population and sample numbers and response rates

	Population	Target sample	Responses	Response rate (%)
Members	18,542	2,610	1,196	45.8
Branch secretaries	1,410	1,009	523	51.8
Total	19,952	3,619	1,719	47.5

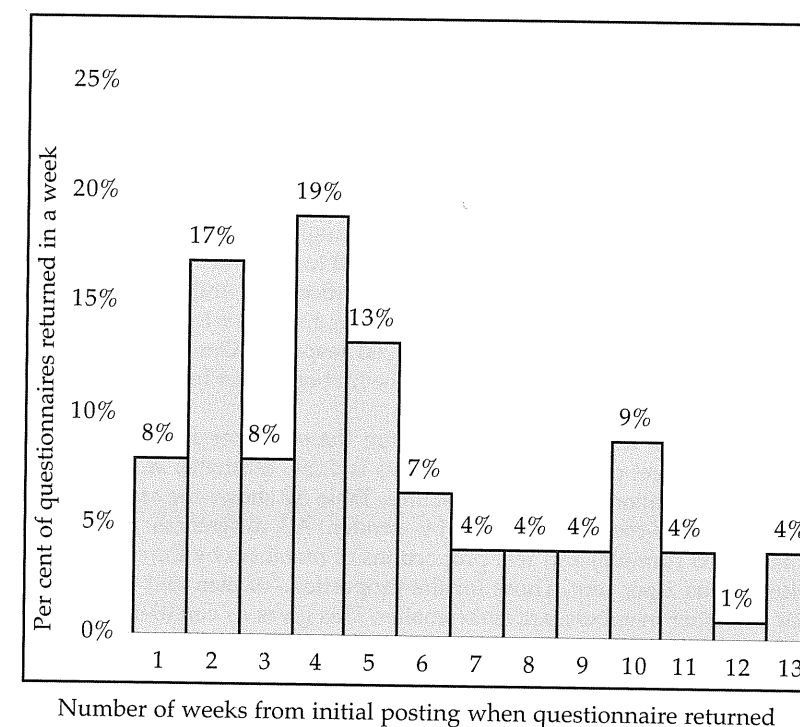
more questionnaires were returned. The second and third spikes in the chart suggest the impact of the reminder postcard and then the second questionnaire.

The satisfactory response rate was due in no small part to support from Fine Gael. The party exhorted members through its newsletter, *Branch Lines*, to fill in their questionnaires, and we wrote to individual TDs informing them about the survey and asking them to do the same. We also explained to individual respondents that Fine Gael would be provided with our general conclusions, which may have had particular impact on those most committed to the party. However, we made it clear in a letter to each potential respondent that this was an independent and academic study which was not being carried out on behalf of the party, nor would any of the data collected on individuals be given to the party. We also suggested to each respondent that our study could make up for the fact that his or her voice was generally ignored in political debate. As an additional inducement, we promised a small donation (50p, i.e. 63 cents) to a charity for each completed questionnaire – potentially a sum of nearly IR£2,000 (2,540 euros). In this way we hoped to obtain responses from as many of the target sample as possible.

The population from which the sample of branch secretaries was taken was turned out to be an exaggerated one. The party's mailing list for secretaries errs on the side of inclusiveness to ensure that as many branches as possible get official communication. As well as current secretaries it probably contains some former secretaries as well as secretaries of some districts and Young Fine Gael branches. Official records for the time list only 992 branches, and thus where estimates are made from the secretaries' reports on branches we have aggregated up only to 992 branches and not 1,410.

In computing estimates of the views of members we have weighted the responses of

Figure A1: Week by week pattern of response



secretaries and other members according to their chances of being included in our sample so that our estimates take into account the fact we have a disproportionately large number of branch secretaries. The weighting factors are 0.92 for members and 0.08 for secretaries. For this reason we have not provided numbers of cases for the tables in the body of the book, since neither a weighted N nor an unweighted N gives the real picture. Calculations of statistical significance take into account the fact that estimates of secretaries' opinions come from around 500 cases, and those of other members from about 1,200 in most instances.

While we view this as a satisfactory and worthwhile sample, questions can be raised about the extent to which the sample is representative. This boils down to asking whether those who did not respond were in some way different from those who did. We see little reason to expect that this would be so in many respects. For instance, when it comes to views on political issues, or to social background, we do not see any good reason to expect significant distortion. There might be more reason to expect some link between whether or not a person responded and his or her commitment to, and extent of involvement in, the party – a factor that, of course, applies to virtually every survey. We have no way of assessing this directly. On the face of it, the fact that branch secretaries were more likely to respond than ordinary members suggests some link with activism. Even so, the difference is quite small, only 6 per cent. We are able to ascertain whether more active and involved members tended to answer more quickly. If so, it would strengthen the argument that less involved members may have delayed their response to a point where they then did not respond at all. Alternatively, if there is no link, if activism is not related to when the questionnaire was returned, then we can have greater confidence that we did not over-sample activists. In fact, there is only a very weak link, with a correlation of just -0.08 between activism and the date on which the questionnaire was returned. (The regression coefficient is 0.52. Since the range of the activism score is 15 points, this indicates that the least active member would, on average, take 7–8 days (15 times 0.52) longer than the most active member to respond.) Almost certainly there is some bias in the sample towards the more active and committed member but nonetheless we found a wide variety of degrees of interest in and commitment to Fine Gael in our responses. Many respondents were pretty inactive. Nor were they all strong supporters. Many said frankly that they were not.

We have little reason to question the sampling frame. A few people contacted us to explain why questionnaires were not returned. As might be expected in such a population, some members were deceased and others too ill to respond. More than twenty people complained they had not received the first questionnaire and were duly sent a second. One recipient informed us that he had not been a member for 10 years. There were less prosaic reasons for non-response, or delayed response. One respondent asked for another questionnaire after his dog had eaten the first one (after he had filled it in, moreover).

On some variables it is possible to compare the estimates from our sample with parameters in the target population. Where this is done, estimates are in all cases very close to known population figures. For instance, Table A2 shows the sample proportions of members by Euro-constituency and by gender. All differences are small. Those between estimated (sample) and real proportions of members by Euro-constituency are within plus/minus 2 per cent. Those for the proportions of men and women, amongst secretaries and other members, are even smaller. This gives us confidence in our figures for other characteristics. The secretaries' questionnaire asked branch secretaries to report on the number of members in their branch. If we total these estimates, and multiply the sum by 992/438 (438 secretaries answered this question) to make up for the fact that we

Table A2: Sample estimates and actual proportions – selected characteristics

	Sample %	Actual %	Difference %
<i>All members by Euro constituency:</i>			
Dublin	12.2	10.5	1.7
Leinster	22.8	22.3	0.4
Connacht-Ulster	25.5	27.1	-1.6
Munster	39.5	40.1	-0.6
<i>Secretaries and other members, by gender:</i>			
All members: %female	31.1	32.2	-1.0
Secretaries: %female	41.8	42.1	-0.3

Note: Actual membership figures by region are from official Fine Gael records, and gender breakdown for actual members and secretaries is calculated by the authors from the sampling frame.

have estimates from just under half the official number of branches (and not all secretaries answered this question), the estimated number of party members comes to just 20,533. This is a slight overestimate of the official figure of almost 19,232 for that time, but it is very close to the 19,952 names in our sampling frame. Secretaries almost certainly gave rounded figures rather than actual ones (there are spikes in the distribution of branch sizes at 15, 20, 25, 30, 40 and 50) that may inflate the figure marginally. Some might think it likely that secretaries from the larger, more successful branches would have been more likely to respond, but in that case we would have expected to overestimate the actual total number of members by a greater margin.

APPENDIX B: The questionnaires and the responses

This essentially reproduces both the member's and secretary's questionnaires, though the response boxes are excluded and it includes the weighted distribution of responses to each closed ended question.

NO SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE IS REQUIRED TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS ON WHICH WE ARE SURE THAT EVERYONE WILL HAVE AN OPINION

The questions inside cover a wide range of subjects. Most of them can be answered by placing an 'X' against the answer you would like to give. For example:  
Were you a member of Fine Gael at the time of the last general election?

If you were a member at the time of the last election put a cross in the first row box as indicated. If not, put a cross in the second box.

1. Yes	X
2. No	

In some cases we will ask you to indicate how strongly you feel about something by placing an 'X' in an appropriate column. For example, to answer the question "How important do you think it is for a TD to speak in Dáil debates?" you should put an 'X' in the appropriate column. The illustration below would show you thought it was very important.

	very important	quite important	not very important	not at all important
How important do you think it is for a TD to speak in Dail debates	X			

In a few cases you are asked to write numbers into boxes. For instance:

What year did you join Fine Gael Write in 

1	9	6	8
---	---	---	---

Most of this questionnaire is designed to be machine readable, so whether you are asked to write an 'X' or a number in a box, please make sure that what you write fits INSIDE the box and does not overflow into any other box. Also, will you please use black or blue ink, or a heavy pencil

We want everyone to take part, not just those with strong views about a particular issue. The questionnaire should not take too long to complete and we think you will find it interesting and enjoyable. It should be completed only by the person to whom it was sent, so that responses will reflect all shades of opinion within the Fine Gael party.

When you have filled it in, please place it in the enclosed FREEPOST envelope and post it back as soon as you possibly can.

SECTION 1

1. Would you call yourself a very strong supporter of Fine Gael, fairly strong, not very strong, or not at all strong?

1. Very strong	51
2. Fairly strong	38
3. Not very strong	9
4. Not at all strong	2

2. Thinking back to the time you first joined Fine Gael, did you approach the party to apply for membership, or did Fine Gael approach you?

1. I approached the party	49
2. The party approached me	39
3. Don't remember	12

3. In approximately which year did you join Fine Gael?

(Write in) 1976

4a. Have you been a member continuously since that time?

1. Yes	93
2. No	7

4b. If you have NOT been a member continuously since you first joined, for about how many years have you been a member?

(Write in) 13 years

4c. Are you, or have you ever been a member of Young Fine Gael?

1. Yes	12
2. No	88

5. Before you joined the party, were either your father or mother a member of Fine Gael?

1. Father and mother were members	36
2. Father only was a member	22
3. Mother only was a member	5
4. Neither were members	38



6. What was your most important reason for joining Fine Gael?

Please put an X in ONE box only

Most important

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. To get Fine Gael into government, or keep it there              | 24 |
| 2. A belief in what Fine Gael stands for                           | 43 |
| 3. A good way to meet interesting people and extend my social life | 3  |
| 4. Opposition to Fianna Fail                                       | 9  |
| 5. As a first step in a political career                           | 1  |
| 6. Influence of family and/or friends                              | 18 |
| 7. Other (specify)   | 28 |

7. Does your family have a tradition of supporting Fine Gael and Cumann na nGaedheal, going back to the civil war of 1922-23?

- |        |    |
|--------|----|
| 1. Yes | 75 |
| 2. No  | 25 |

8. Thinking back over the last twelve months, about how often, as far as you know, has your local branch met?

- |                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| 1. Not at all        | 3  |
| 2. Once or twice     | 33 |
| 3. 3-5 times         | 30 |
| 4. More than 5 times | 24 |
| 5. Don't know        | 9  |

9. And during the last twelve months, how often have you personally attended a local Fine Gael branch meeting?

- |                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| 1. Not at all        | 18 |
| 2. Once or twice     | 44 |
| 3. 3-5 times         | 25 |
| 4. More than 5 times | 14 |

10. Are you in frequent contact with a number of members of your branch through your work or social life?

- |        |    |
|--------|----|
| 1. Yes | 74 |
| 2. No  | 26 |

11. Do you live in the constituency where your branch is located?

- |        |    |
|--------|----|
| 1. Yes | 93 |
| 2. No  | 7  |

12. Thinking about the last local meeting you attended, how much time was spent on each of the following?

- |  | No<br>time | Some<br>time | Most of<br>the time | All of<br>the time |
|--|------------|--------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Internal party organisation matters | 12         | 69           | 16                  | 3                  |
| 2. Fund raising                        | 9          | 70           | 9                   | 2                  |
| 3. Local political matters             | 3          | 46           | 45                  | 5                  |
| 4. National political matters          | 14         | 70           | 12                  | 4                  |

13. How active do you consider yourself to be in Fine Gael, relative to the average member?

- |                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| 1. Very active       | 20 |
| 2. Fairly active     | 41 |
| 3. Not very active   | 29 |
| 4. Not at all active | 10 |

14. Are you more active or less active within the party than you were four years ago, (or when you joined if this was less than 4 years ago)?

- |                   |    |
|-------------------|----|
| 1. More active    | 20 |
| 2. Less active    | 32 |
| 3. About the same | 48 |

If you are now more active or less active:

15. What is the most important reason why you are more active or less active than four years ago?

WRITE IN \_\_\_\_\_

16. Approximately how much money do you give to Fine Gael every year, taking into account membership fees, Superdraw, and any other donations? [£1 = 1.27 euro]

- |                  |    |
|------------------|----|
| 1. Nothing       | 3  |
| 2. Less than £10 | 21 |
| 3. £10 to £50    | 49 |
| 4. £50 to £100   | 21 |
| 5. £100 or more  | 6  |

## SECTION 2

17. Over the last four years, have you found that you tend to get actively involved in the party only at election times?

- |        |    |
|--------|----|
| 1. Yes | 57 |
| 2. No  | 43 |

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