

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