

Attitudes to the other parties partly reflect the perceived policy stances of those parties – perhaps smaller parties are more strongly associated with specific policies in the minds of voters generally than larger parties are. For example, rural Fine Gael members do not like the Greens, and this undoubtedly has a lot to do with perceptions of the Greens as a party that puts the environment ahead of both job creation and the rights of property owners, especially farmers. The average score given to the Greens by the farmers among the Fine Gael membership was only 25, compared with an average of 34 among all other members. One of our questions (Q48.5) asked members whether they agreed that job creation should take top priority even when this means damage to the environment, and we found that those who strongly agree with this take a markedly less favourable view of the Greens (they give the party an average score of 25) than those who strongly disagree (they give the Greens an average score of 37). There is some tendency for younger members, members with most education, and women to rate the Greens more highly than other members.

Attitudes towards Sinn Féin do not vary significantly, with all sections of the party displaying strongly negative feelings towards the party. The least hostile group consists of those members who believe that the Irish government of the day, when framing its Northern Ireland policy, should have special regard for northern nationalists. These members give Sinn Féin an average score of 32, while other members give it an average score of just 17.

FINE GAEL AND FIANNA FÁIL

The difference between the two main parties is, as we have said before, one of the most intriguing mysteries of Irish politics. Barry Desmond quotes a Cork Fianna Fáil perspective on this puzzle: “Dem dat know don’t need to ask and dem dat don’t know don’t need to know”.³ Given that so many people claim that there is little or no policy difference between these two parties, we wondered what differences Fine Gael members themselves perceived, and whether certain categories of Fine Gael members were less hostile than others to Fianna Fáil. We found that when it came to members’ ratings of Fianna Fáil, those members who were least active and least interested in political issues were the least hostile to Fianna Fáil; not, we suspect, because these members have a particularly positive view of that party, but because they care less about the political battle and about politics generally, or because they don’t think there is much difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael: warmth towards Fianna Fáil was inversely related to interest in national political issues; those members who are most interested give Fianna Fáil a score of 32, while those who are least interested give it a score of 41 (see Table 8.4). Similarly, those who see no real policy differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are the least hostile to Fianna Fáil, and those members who would welcome a merger between their party and Fianna Fáil are, hardly surprisingly, more favourably disposed towards Fianna Fáil than are other members.

Table 8.4: Fine Gael members' ratings of Fianna Fáil, by selected variables

	Average thermometer score awarded to FF by FG members
All members	34
<i>Interested in political issues?</i>	
Very	32
Quite	35
Not at all	41
<i>Main FF–FG policy difference</i>	
Some policy area cited	31
Response given: "None"	39
<i>Would you welcome a FG–FF merger?</i>	
Yes	43
No	31

Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, questions 98, 24, 6, 86, 85.

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

It is also no surprise that those who joined the party for what we have termed "solidary" reasons – for example, to meet people, or due to the influence of their family and friends – have less strong anti-Fianna Fáil feelings than other members; as we noted in previous chapters, these members tend to be relatively apolitical. In contrast, those who joined to get Fine Gael into government, or joined out of opposition to Fianna Fáil, give Fianna Fáil a lower score than other members do. As with attitudes to the other parties, we find that policy perceptions do play some part, and Fianna Fáil's image as a relatively clericalist and nationalist party has a bearing on members' attitudes. Fianna Fáil is most highly regarded by those Fine Gael members who attend church most often and, in addition, it receives above-average scores from those members who want Fine Gael to become more conservative and who favour a line of having special regard for nationalists when it comes to the government's Northern Ireland policy.

We asked two questions designed to discover the key factor that Fine Gael members would identify as distinguishing the two parties. First, we asked which of a short list of policy areas was the one where the parties differed most, and then we invited members to tell us in their own words what they saw as the main difference. Of the four main policy areas presented in the first question, Northern Ireland was most often cited, and this was followed by taxation and then agriculture, with only 5 per cent seeing the EU as the policy area where differences were greatest (Figure 8.1). However, a plurality of members answered that they did not see *any* real policy differences between the two major parties, a pattern that we would not expect to find in any other European country.