

to take on responsibility and do some work.

Members may exaggerate their own activity, of course – though there is no reason why this is more likely to be true of Fine Gael members than of members of any other party – so we also asked branch secretaries to tell us about the pattern of activism in their branch. The secretaries' reports are in line with what the ordinary members say. According to the secretaries, each branch meeting is attended by about half of the membership of the branch (Table 5.1). The great majority (91 per cent) of secretaries said there was a core group in their branch that does most of the work between elections, and on average the size of this group was estimated at about six, with the number of "very active" members, who might be frequent attenders without doing as much of the work as the core group, seen as slightly larger. Extrapolating the figures in Table 5.1 to the national level, where in 1999 Fine Gael had about 20,000 members and 1,000 branches, would suggest that the party could count on approximately 7,000 genuinely active members.

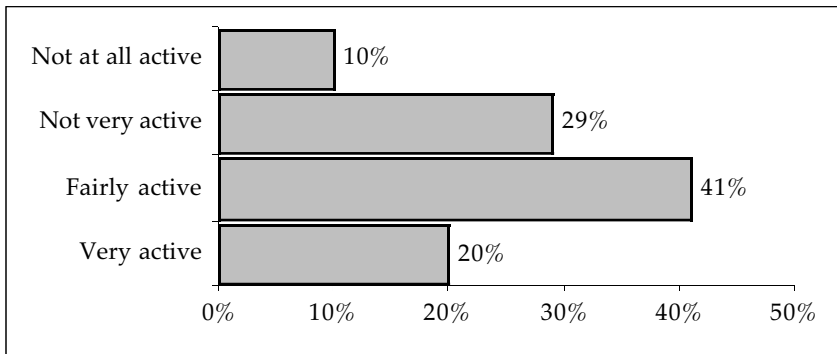
We might expect to find a kind of "pyramid of activism", with a broad base of fairly or completely inactive members, a smaller number of quite active members, and even fewer highly active members. However, both the secretaries' reports, as we have seen, and members' own assessments suggest instead that the profile of activism resembles a cross-section of an oval more than a pyramid: the largest proportion of members seems to be in the middle (quite active) category, with smaller numbers at each end, representing those who are highly active or inactive. When members were asked how active they saw themselves as being, not in absolute terms but in relation to the average Fine Gael member, only 10 per cent described themselves as "not at all active", with just over a quarter seeing themselves as not very active and a fifth placing themselves in the most active category (Figure 5.2). The largest proportion, over 40 per cent, described themselves as fairly active. This contrasts strikingly with the pattern found by researchers who studied the British Conservative party, where over 80 per cent placed themselves in one of the two least active categories: 45 per cent described themselves as not at all active and 36 per cent as not very active.<sup>10</sup> Activity levels in the British Greens, too, took a pyramidal shape, with about 50 per cent being inactive, 30 per cent doing a little and the remaining 20 per cent

**Table 5.1: Activism within Fine Gael branches, as reported by branch secretaries**

	Average	Median	Maximum	Minimum
Branch members	21	16	156	5
Average attendance at branch meetings	11	10	60	3
Very active members	8	6	40	1
Core group	6	6	20	1

Source: Fine Gael secretaries' questionnaire, questions 2, 3, 8, 5.

**Figure 5.2: Self-perceived activity level of members, relative to average member**



Source: Fine Gael members' questionnaire, question 13.

supplying the activists.<sup>11</sup>

### Linkage role

One important role that parties have traditionally performed is what is termed a "linkage" role between civil society and the state. In the words of Kay Lawson, "Parties are seen, both by their members and by others, as agencies for forging links between citizens and policy-makers".<sup>12</sup> From the earliest days of political parties, as Richard Katz puts it, "the party organization served as the key linkage between candidates and elected officials on one side and the unorganized ... mass public on the other".<sup>13</sup> A lot of the academic literature on political parties in recent years has questioned the ability of parties to continue discharging this function. It is argued that for a variety of reasons – such as the rise of single-issue pressure groups, declining party membership, the use of television as a means of communication, and the introduction of public funding of parties – the political parties in many countries have moved closer to the state and further away from the ordinary people. "No longer simple brokers between civil society and the state, the parties now become absorbed by the state".<sup>14</sup>

However, in contrast to this general picture, studies of Irish politics frequently emphasise the notion of politicians providing "linkage" between citizens and the state. There are many accounts of the way in which people approach a TD for assistance in dealing with the bureaucracy, resulting in politicians' spending a lot of their time on constituency casework rather than discussing legislation.<sup>15</sup> Exactly what the causes of this phenomenon are, whether it is really as unique to Ireland as is sometimes supposed, and whether its advantages outweigh the disadvantages, are questions that we do not need to go into here. It does, though, suggest that politicians are very actively performing a linkage role, and our interest here lies in what part the party itself plays in this. The subject has not been systematically studied. Some politicians engage in a great deal of contact with the public at "clinics" (the politician arranges to be