

**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.

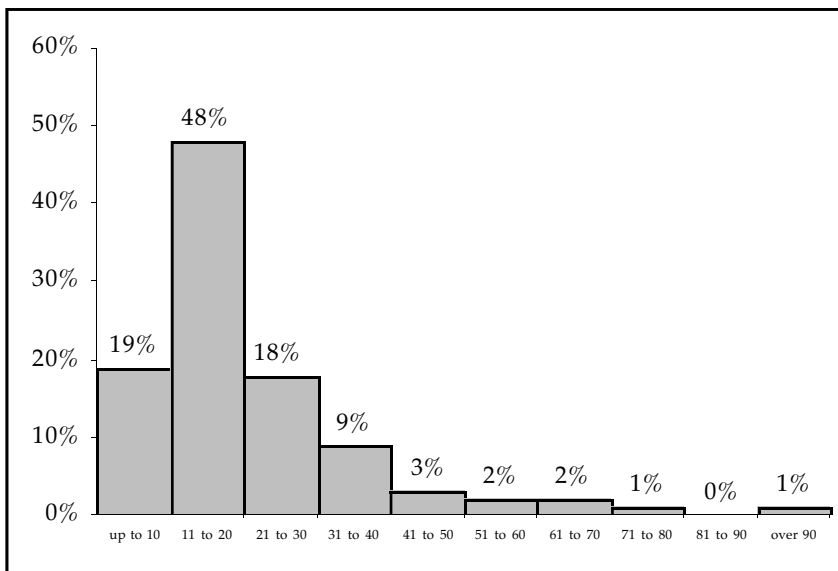
although numbers do fluctuate, reaching a peak just before elections and then declining again. Chubb estimates Fine Gael membership at 12–15,000 in 1967, a figure that, if it is accurate, emphasises the increase in membership under the leadership of Garret FitzGerald.<sup>2</sup> Peter Mair's description 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

thirty years ago.

The number of branches has also fallen from the 1,500 or so of the mid-1980s. There were 992 in 1999, the year of our study, a decline of about 33 per cent, paralleling the decline in member numbers. This suggests that the average size of a branch has not changed much. Indeed, in 1985, the last year in which membership exceeded 30,000, there were 1,569 registered branches, with an average size of almost 19 members. In 1999, the year of our survey, average size was only a little larger. Figure 4.1 shows the distribution of branch sizes based on information derived from our sample of secretaries. There are lots of small branches, few larger ones, and only a couple of very large branches with well over 100 members. The average figure (20.7) is somewhat distorted by the small number of very large branches. Two-thirds have no more than 20 members. Half actually have no more than 16 members. In other words, the party consists for the most part of numerous small branches, each of no more than 20 people, often no more than the bare 9 required for a legitimate branch. This is the setting into which new members come, and in which activities, such as they are, take place.

From the figures provided already it is clear that currently only a small proportion of those who vote for the party actually belong to it. In the 1997 general election Fine Gael won almost 500,000 votes, which means there were about 26 Fine Gael voters for every one Fine Gael member. Put another way, only 4 per cent of Fine Gael voters are party members.<sup>5</sup> This is low by European standards where the average level of membership is about 8 per cent of the electorate,<sup>6</sup> and thus about 10 per cent of those voting. Parties are more narrowly political in

**Figure 4.1: Branch sizes in 1999**



Source: Fine Gael secretaries' questionnaire, question 2.