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”. 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. 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.

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.21 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...