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EXPLAINING ACTIVISM LEVELS AMONG FINE GAEL MEMBERS: A TEST OF THE GENERAL INCENTIVES MODEL

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s Seyd and Whiteley devised a 'general incentives theory' to explain variation in levels of activism among members of political parties. The theory takes into account individual members' assessments of a variety of potential costs and potential benefits that might result from activism. The model performs reasonably well on data derived from British party members. In this article it is tested on data from members of Fine Gael, the second largest Irish party. Its explanatory power proves to be similar to that found for the British data, though it works less well when applied to those Fine Gael members whose primary allegiance is to an individual local politician than to those who support the party as a whole. The article raises some questions about the validity of some assumptions of the general incentives theory.

The search for testable theories that can account for regularities in behaviour is often seen as a cornerstone of empirical social science. Such theories should then be tested across a range of contexts to explore the limits of generality. This article seeks to follow that prescription as it assesses the reasons why people are active in an Irish political party.

In some eyes party activism is unfashionable nowadays, when there is much talk of the decline of parties and of the appeal of single-issue movements as a means to pursue political goals. Yet we still need political parties if electoral democracy is to function in any kind of coherent fashion, and, despite suggestions that parties no longer need members,

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active members in particular are a rich resource in many ways (Scarrow, 1996: 41–6). Analysis in both Britain and Ireland shows that members, especially active ones, are vote multipliers; the more active members a party has in a constituency, the more votes it will win there (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992: 181–200; Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 135–9). But if it is clear why parties still need members, it is less clear why individuals join parties and become active within them.

Several sorts of explanation have been suggested. First, people may participate for instrumental reasons: people are active because activity brings certain rewards. These may be things like furthering certain policy goals, furthering personal ambitions for office, or merely reaping the social rewards of collective activity, what Clark and Wilson (1961) called the ‘promotional’, ‘material’ and ‘solidary’ benefits of participation. These explanations that stress rewards or incentives are usually cast in an explicit rational actor, ‘cost–benefit’ framework, where activity is also seen to have a potential cost which must be outweighed by the rewards or benefits. Another set of reasons why people participate is essentially normative: people are active because they feel they ought to be, because activity is ‘normal’ and because it provides them with an opportunity to express their values and loyalties. A third explanation for participation deals with the skills, resources and opportunities of people, arguing that differential levels of participation stem from the fact that some people have them and others do not (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). We will return to this approach later.

The first two types of explanation have been gathered by Seyd and Whiteley, together with associates, into a single model that they call a *general incentives* model (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley *et al.*, 1993; Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994; Whiteley and Seyd, 1996; 1998). This combines norms and expressive motivations with instrumental ones. Using this approach and employing data from surveys of party members, Seyd and Whiteley explore activism in both the Labour and Conservative parties in Britain and reach a number of conclusions. First, they argue that a model of this sort can account quite successfully for variations in individual levels of activity. In various analyses the proportion of variance explained is between 0.18 and 0.31, a respectable enough degree of explained variance for survey data of this type. Second, they argue that the success of their more general model demonstrates that a rational actor approach in itself cannot account for such high level (and high cost) forms of participation. This is significant, given the perceived inability of the rational actor approach to deal with a low-level, low-cost form of participation: voting (Aldrich, 1993; but see Blais, 2000). A third point is that the results from analyses of both parties

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are broadly similar, despite different levels of activism in the two parties. This leads the authors to assert:

If the model applies to both parties when they are very different in their political traditions, organisational structures and rates of activism, it supports the inference that the general incentives model provides a general explanation of party activism (Whiteley *et al.*, 1993: 91).

If one swallow does not make a summer, it is doubtful if two will suffice. This article, however, will potentially add another. Moreover, in assessing the value of the general incentives model as applied to Fine Gael, it will examine a party with another set of traditions, structures, and rates of activism. If the model proves robust faced with this challenge, the conclusions of Seyd and Whiteley will acquire a little more validity.

The next section of this paper outlines the general incentives model and discusses some reasons why it might not fit the Fine Gael case so well. The third section tests the model using data available from a recent survey of members of Fine Gael. In the final section we discuss the results and assess the model.

The General Incentives Model

Seyd and Whiteley's model is rooted in rational choice theory. This theory postulates that individuals will calculate costs and benefits of any action before engaging in it (Olson, 1965). This basic model is as follows:

$$A_i = (p_i \times B) - C_i$$

where A_i is the level of activism of individual i ; p_i is the probability that i 's involvement will result in the implementation of the collective goods desired by the party; B is the collective good resulting from the implementation of the party programme; and C_i is the cost of participating in party activity for i . The collective good is weighted by the personal influence variable (p_i). This is because a collective benefit, such as the consequences of a particular party getting into government, will accrue to the actor regardless of his or her participation, so 'free-riding' would be rational unless the individual's activity has some chance of making a difference.

However, there are problems with this model, explored at length by Mancur Olson (1965). He argued that, from the perspective of a rational actor, the idea that people would join and become active in organisations because they wanted to bring about certain policy goals was implausible. This was because one individual's activity would not make any difference

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to the realisation of the goal, and because the goal, if realised, would benefit all equally, regardless of participation. Hence, Olson asserted, people must derive *selective* individual benefits from participating, benefits that they would not get unless they were members.

Following Olson, Seyd and Whiteley include what they term outcome, process and ideological incentives in their model. *Outcome incentives* describe a person's desire to achieve political office as the reason for their activism within the party. *Process incentives* are related to the enjoyment of the political process for its own sake. A desire to meet like-minded people and to participate in group activity can function as incentives to activism. Ideology is also included in the model as a process-type incentive. Activists with ideological ideas become motivated in order to give expression to their beliefs and to join with others of similar beliefs.

The *general incentives* model incorporates these variables but also includes incentives that lie outside the rational-choice framework. Seyd and Whiteley conclude that while one cannot exclude the rational actor model from accounting for some form of participation, general (i.e. non-rational) incentives are equally, if not more, important in explaining activism. Their model incorporates two social-psychological variables, namely expressive evaluations and social norms. Expressive evaluations describe how much affection or loyalty a member has for the party. Norms signify ideas that will promote the idea of (party) activism as normal behaviour by ordinary people rather than a pastime for extremists or the maladjusted.

Putting these together the general incentives model is defined as follows:

$$A_i = (p_i \times B) - C_i + O_i + P_i + I_i + E_i + N_i$$

where

- A_i is the level of activism of individual i ;
- p_i is the probability that i 's involvement will result in the implementation of the policy outcomes desired (or collective goods);
- B is the collective good resulting from the implementation of the party programme;
- C_i is the cost of participating in party activity for i .
- O_i are the selective outcome incentives for i resulting from activism;
- P_i are selective process incentives for i resulting from activism;
- I_i are ideological incentives from activism for i .
- E_i measures the expressive evaluation of i towards the party; and
- N_i measures the extent to which social norms support i 's activity.

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There are a few reasons why we might expect the results for Fine Gael to differ from those for the Labour and Conservative parties. One is that Fine Gael operates within a different structure and style of party competition. It is a centre party, not a party of the left or the right like the British parties (at least around 1990, when these surveys were carried out). At the very least we might expect the relationship between ideology and activism to be different. Party competition at national level in Ireland is arguably less ideological and less policy driven than it is in Britain. Hence we might expect the sort of ideological and policy driven motivations for activity to be far less prominent. A second and related point is that Fine Gael itself may be different from the Labour and Conservative parties in being constructed at least in part of attachments to individual politicians rather than to the party as a whole (see the discussion in Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 106–14). The endemic rivalry between politicians of the major Irish parties rarely takes on an ideological tone. To the extent that members are attracted by individual (local) politicians rather than by what a national party represents, we might expect motivations for activism to differ from those in Britain. For instance, we might expect that expressive evaluations towards the party, and the collective goods desired by the party, would be less important.

Analysis

Full details of how each concept is operationalised are given below but a few general points need to be made here first to explain how comparable our measures are to those of Seyd and Whiteley. First of all, the various analyses conducted by Seyd and Whiteley are themselves not all identical. Operationalisations change between their Labour Party study (1992) and later work (1993; 1994; 1996). As far as possible we have tried to follow the later work. Secondly, Seyd and Whiteley use a broader set of instruments than are available to us. They measure concepts such as ‘personal influence’, ‘costs’, ‘process’ and ‘outcomes’ incentives by two or three items combined into a scale. In these cases we have been forced to base our measures on a single item. This must be expected to increase error in the measurement and so decrease the associations that are found. To allow us to estimate the extent to which this accounts for any differences between our results and those of Seyd and Whiteley, we have reanalysed their data using our more limited measures. Comparisons are then made between our findings, their original findings, and our re-analysis of their data.

Thirdly, there are some areas where we cannot use the same measure but have to use something that is ‘functionally equivalent’. One is the

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measure of 'collective benefits' or policy preferences. The Irish political agenda is not the British one. Like Seyd and Whiteley we have taken several issues that we think capture the essence of recent policy debate, measured members' views on these, and then scored the responses in terms of their distance from what seems to be the party's position. Moreover, we have measured issue preferences whereas they used items measuring what members thought government should do. Our activism measure is also essentially a functionally equivalent measure, although it does include several of the items used by Seyd and Whiteley.

Finally, we have followed Seyd and Whiteley in presenting our results in the form of standardised regression coefficients. These represent the impact of one variable on another in terms of standard deviations rather than of raw scores. Hence a coefficient of 0.15 indicates that a change of one standard deviation in x will lead to a change of 0.15 standard deviations in y . This is useful here in overcoming the differences in the measurement of certain variables. Because they deal in real units of measurement, unstandardised coefficients are preferable to standardised ones in most instances, but where the measures are themselves constructs, as they are here, standardised measures facilitate comparability.

The data on Fine Gael comes from a survey of party members conducted in 1999–2000. We selected a simple random sample of 1,009 secretaries and 2,610 other members. Each individual selected in this way was sent a questionnaire along with a pre-paid envelope for returning it. Eventually, 1,719 usable questionnaires were returned, 523 from those sampled as branch secretaries and 1,196 from other members. This is an overall response rate of 47 per cent. (For more details see Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: Appendix A.) Our measures are detailed below.

Activism

An additive scale was constructed from the following items using standardised measures on each item. This is equivalent to a principal components factor analysis. The items are:

- 'How active do you consider yourself to be in Fine Gael, relative to the average member?';
- 'During the last twelve months, how often have you personally attended a local Fine Gael branch meeting?';
- 'Approximately how much money do you give to Fine Gael every year, taking into account membership fees, Superdraw, and any other donations?';
- 'Did you take part in a constituency convention to select Fine Gael candidates for the 1997 general election?';

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- ‘Do you at present hold any branch or constituency organisation office(s) within Fine Gael?’;
- ‘Did you take an active part in any Fine Gael election campaigns during the last four years?’;
- ‘How much time do you devote to party activities in the average month?’

The scale has high reliability (Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79), which cannot be improved by dropping any item. This parallels Seyd and Whiteley’s work, which has used both Likert and factor analysis of these or similar items to construct a scale.

Collective Benefits

An additive index was constructed from the following items, again using standardised scores for each item.

- ‘Some say European Unification should be pushed further. Others say it has already gone too far’ was scored 3 for ‘pushed further’, 2 for ‘don’t know’ and 1 for ‘too far’;
- ‘Should Ireland drop its neutrality, to take part in a common defence policy in the EU’ was scored 3 for ‘yes’, 2 for ‘don’t know’ and 1 for ‘no’;
- ‘With regard to Northern Ireland, should the Irish government of the day have special regard for the views and concerns of Northern nationalists; or for Northern unionists, or should it try to be even handed as between Northern nationalists and Northern unionists’ was scored 3 for ‘even handed’, 2 for ‘nationalists’ and 1 for the rest;
- ‘Should the government intervene more decisively in the economy so as to transfer wealth and resources from the wealthy to the less well off?’ was a 5 point agree–disagree scale scored highest for agree strongly;
- ‘Which of the following phrases comes closest to your own opinion about abortion? It should be allowed in special circumstances’ (3) ‘It should be allowed only where there is a threat to the mother’s life’ (2) and ‘It should not be allowed in any circumstances’, ‘It should be allowed for any woman who wants it’ and ‘don’t know’ all (1).

This scale is much more problematic than the activism scale as there is some room for debate as to what Fine Gael policy actually is on these items. We have taken the view that the party is essentially pro-European integration, pragmatic about neutrality, even handed on the nationalist dimension, pragmatic on abortion and left of centre on redistribution. Reliability is very weak here (Cronbach’s alpha is only 0.27), indicating

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the lack of structure in Fine Gael members' policy preferences (this is elaborated further in Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: ch.7).

Personal Influence

- 'The Fine Gael party leadership doesn't pay a lot of attention to the views of ordinary party members' (5 point agree-disagree scale).

This differs from Seyd and Whiteley's work. In their 1992 study they used this item and two others combined into a three-item Likert scale. In their other work, however, they have asked members to rate the extent to which they personally could influence politics by participating in the various activities used in their activity scales. Analysis of the Conservative member study data provides a correlation of only 0.14 between their scale of member influence and the personal influence question available to us.

Costs

- 'Attending party meetings can be pretty tiring after a hard day's work' (5-point scale).

Seyd and Whiteley join this with two other items. The correlation between this item and a scale of the three, using the 1992 Conservative member study again, is 0.75, although alpha for the scale itself is only 0.49.

Process Incentive

- 'The only way to be really educated about politics is to be a party activist' (5-point agree-disagree scale).

Seyd and Whiteley join this with two other items. The correlation between this item and a scale of the three, using the 1992 Conservative member study again, is 0.74, although alpha for the scale itself is only 0.55.

Outcome Incentive

- 'Fine Gael would be more successful if more people like me were elected to the Dáil' (5 point agree-disagree scale).

Seyd and Whiteley join this with one other item. The correlation between this item and a scale of the two items, using the 1992 Conservative member study again, is 0.85; alpha for the scale itself is 0.65.

Ideology

Self-placement on a 10-point left-right scale. We use this to distinguish those in the centre (points 5 and 6) from the rest using a 1/0 coding. As indicated above, Seyd and Whitely use the full 10-point scale.

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Expressive Incentive

- ‘Would you call yourself a very strong supporter of Fine Gael, fairly strong, not very strong, or not strong at all?’

This is scored 4, 3, 2 and 1. It is identical to the measure used in Seyd and Whiteley’s work with exception of their Labour party study (1992) in which a party thermometer score is used. The correlation between the two measures in their Conservative study is 0.41. In our Fine Gael study it is only 0.16.

Norms

- ‘What was your most important reason for joining Fine Gael?’

This was a closed question offering several options but calling for only one response (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 230).¹ Those respondents that indicated influence of family and friends were coded as 1; all other reasons were coded as 0. Seyd and Whiteley use this measure in their initial Labour party study (1992) but thereafter employ measures based on respondents’ answers to questions asking what people close to them thought of Conservative members and activists, and whether people close to them would agree that ‘people can have a real influence if they are prepared to get involved’.

Results

Table 1 shows a number of estimates for the general incentives model. At first glance the analysis suggests that the model fits Fine Gael pretty well. R^2 is 0.25, which is actually above the variance explained for Labour and Conservatives using the more limited measures available for Fine Gael. As we might have expected, the more policy relevant factors are rather weak. Ideology is not significant at the conventional 0.05 level, and while collective benefits weighted by personal efficacy is significant the coefficient is pretty low.² The other process incentive – enjoying organisational activity for its own sake – is weak, although the sign is as expected. Outcome incentives, as we have measured them, are rather more powerful and provide the second strongest link with activism. Costs too are a significant item, with those seeing activity as sometimes costly less likely to be active.

Norms are not significant, and anyway the coefficient has the wrong sign. The measure here is weak, but the better measures employed by Seyd and Whiteley (discussed below) do not suggest a strong relationship either. However, what is very important is the expressive element of

TABLE 1
ESTIMATED GENERAL INCENTIVES MODEL OF ACTIVISM FOR FINE GAEL AND FOR BRITISH LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE PARTIES

	FG (1)	Labour (2)	Conservatives (3)	Labour (4)	Conservatives (5)	Labour (6)	Conservatives (7)
Process	0.05 (0.108)	0.13 (0.000)	0.09 (0.000)	0.11*	0.18**	0.12**	0.16**
Outcome	0.14 (0.000)	0.06 (0.000)	0.05 (0.008)	0.30*	0.22**	0.24**	0.12**
Collective benefits	0.07 (0.010)	0.10 (0.000)	0.06 (0.007)	0.16*	0.23**	0.09**	0.33**
efficacy							
Costs	-0.11 (0.000)	-0.01 (0.598)	-0.07 (0.000)	-0.04*	-0.05*	0.07**	-0.02
Expressive	0.39 (0.000)	0.29 (0.000)	0.33 (0.000)	0.03*	0.12*	0.14**	0.18**
Norms	-0.04 (0.157)	0.02 (0.134)	0.05 (0.008)	-0.02	-0.04	0.06**	-0.01
Ideology	0.05 (0.147)	0.03 (0.046)	-0.04 (0.094)	0.10*	-0.09**	0.10**	-0.08**
R ²	0.25	0.13	0.18	0.18	0.21	0.18	0.31
F	43.6	102.9	69.9				
N (weighted)	1264	4913	2168				

Standardised regression coefficients, with *p* values in brackets. Previously published estimates are provided for comparison. Signs on the ideology variables have been altered from the originals so a positive association is in all cases what is expected.

*Significant at 0.05 level (or above in column 4).

**Significant at 0.01 level.

Sources: (1) Fine Gael members study (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002); (2) Re-analysis of data from Labour party member study (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992); (3) Re-analysis of data from Conservative party member study (Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994); (4) Seyd and Whiteley, 1992: 112; (5) Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson, 1994: 119; (6) Whiteley and Seyd, 1996: 224; (7) Whiteley *et al.*, 1993: 89.

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activism. The coefficient of 0.39 here indicates a close relationship. Those who are stronger supporters of the party are much more likely to be active within it.

Taking our own analysis of the Seyd and Whiteley data, which is displayed in columns 2 and 3 of Table 1, a comparison between Fine Gael and the British parties shows quite a few similarities. Expressive motivations are most powerful in all three parties. Norms, ideology and collective benefits are quite weak, and the process and outcome incentives stronger. Results for Fine Gael are rarely extreme, and often lie between those of the Labour and Conservative parties. In this respect, the results might be seen as confirming the generality of the general incentives model.

Comparing our results with those published by Seyd and Whiteley throws up some more striking differences, with process, outcome and collective benefits generally stronger and expressive motivations weaker in their results. It could be that the expressive measure (which is the one we have used) is picking up some of what would be explained by these other factors if our other measures were better but the fact that the overall fit of the model to the data is better in columns 6 and 7 than it is in columns 2 and 3, as shown by the higher values of R^2 , suggests that this is not the only change. It is also interesting to see that the collective benefits coefficient is stronger in the columns on the right hand side of the table. While we employed the same measure of collective benefits in our replication, the measure of personal influence used by Seyd and Whiteley in their work is more extensive, and may be responsible for the greater weight of that variable in their own analyses. As we have indicated already, this variable is probably poorly measured in our own analysis. The improvement in measurement generally appears to strengthen some relationships as it weakens that for expressive motivations. Obviously we do not know what would happen to the estimates for Fine Gael if we could use better measures, but the table as a whole certainly gives us no reason to expect them to be any more unusual, relative to those of the other parties.

The overall similarity between the three parties is surprising in view of the points raised earlier about the strength and importance of personal networks within Fine Gael. Some have argued that Fine Gael members are not really partisans of Fine Gael as such but simply supporters of individual politicians – politicians who, perhaps, just so happen to belong to Fine Gael (Carty 1981: 130). The survey of Fine Gael members asked members whether they regarded themselves as being a strong supporter of one of the party's leading politicians in the constituency or whether they supported all of the party's politicians equally. Nearly half of Fine

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Gael members are oriented primarily towards a specific politician (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 108). Other questions designed to measure the same phenomenon produced comparable results. Members were asked whether, at the 1997 general election and the 1999 local election, they had worked equally for all the party's candidates or primarily to secure the election of one particular candidate. In each case, more members had been working for the election of one specific candidate than for the party ticket as a whole (Gallagher and Marsh, 2002: 109). To see if this feature has any impact we re-ran the general incentives model for two types of member, one who reported supporting one particular person in a constituency and the other who claimed to support all politicians equally. This is undoubtedly a crude measure, but there is a chance that it captures something of the difference between those who are party supporters first and foremost, and those who are followers of an individual.

The results are in Table 2. Our expectation was that collective benefits and ideology would, if anything, be more important in explaining activism for those who are essentially party supporters. Furthermore, we expected that expressive motivations, which are here measured in party terms, would be much less important for those who are supporters of a person. These are borne out, at least to some extent. Only for members who support all politicians equally are collective benefits significant and the coefficient is twice as large for this group of members as it is for those who support one candidate in particular. Furthermore, the expressive motivation is much more important for such members. However, ideological motivations are not important for either group. The model as a whole also fits the more personally oriented member less well: R^2 is 0.22 as opposed to 0.29 for the party oriented member.

Another way to evaluate the general incentives model is to see how well it accounts for, or subsumes, other findings or models. One alternative formulation sees socio-economic status as the key to participation (those of higher status participate more) and is thus termed the SES model by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995). The reasons lie in the additional resources higher status groups have: in particular, money, skills and time. Whiteley and Seyd (1996) found that SES in general did not add significantly to what could be explained by the general incentives model, although one element (income) did. We have no measure for income but we can examine the extent to which social class, gender and education correlate with levels of activism. Gallagher and Marsh (2002: 100) showed that there were some bivariate relationships between SES and activism but it remains to be seen whether or not these hold independently of the incentives detailed above.

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TABLE 2
ESTIMATED GENERAL INCENTIVES MODEL OF ACTIVISM FOR TWO TYPES
OF FINE GAEL MEMBER

	Member supports one politician in particular	Member supports all politicians equally
Process	0.05 (0.361)	0.05 (0.151)
Outcome	0.17 (0.001)	0.14 (0.000)
Collective benefits* efficacy	0.05 (0.293)	0.10 (0.020)
Costs	-0.10 (0.025)	-0.12 (0.001)
Expressive	0.32 (0.000)	0.44 (0.000)
Norms	-0.06 (0.182)	-0.05 (0.155)
Ideology	-0.05 (0.244)	-0.02 (0.591)
R ²	0.22	0.29
F	14.66	39.00
N (weighted)	551	696

Standardised regression coefficients, with *p* values in brackets.

Source: Fine Gael members study.

In addition, Gallagher and Marsh also found a link between activism and how long a member had been in the party, with longer-serving members more active (2002: 99–102). This held regardless of age. Also positively related to activism were optimism about the future, and perceptions of differences between Fine Gael and Fianna Fail. By adding these factors to the model we can explore whether or not the reasons for the apparent impact of experience lie in the factors already considered.

To do this we regressed each of these factors – SES (education and occupation), length of membership, perceived differences between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and optimism – on activism and saved the predicted values.³ These were then added to the general incentives model estimated in Table 1. Table 3 shows the results. We are interested here in whether or not the new terms are significant, and in whether or not they induce any change in the model elsewhere. Neither SES nor length of membership was significant. Whatever contribution they might make can be said to be encompassed by the general model. For instance, membership experience might generate stronger support for the party; low SES might increase the costs of membership. Optimists were more active. The significance of this result is marginal but if it is accepted it does seem to be in accord with the general incentives model even if it is not explicitly included. There is less point in working for a party in the hope of obtaining office one day if you are pessimistic about the party's medium-term chances. Those who see a policy difference between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are also significantly more active.⁴ This again seems to

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accord with the broad thrust of the model, although exactly what concept is measured by the variable is less obvious. If it is to be seen as a collective benefit it should be weighted by personal influence (p_i), but then it is not significant. However, this factor also induces a decline in the collective benefits p_i variable.

This problem highlights a difficulty with the general incentives model as outlined. There is perhaps a little too much flexibility in the concepts, which it seems can incorporate the same measure under different headings, and very different measures under the same heading. Seyd and Whiteley's initial formulation used a party thermometer scale to measure 'expressive or altruistic' incentives (1992: 107). Later, it was used to measure a separate concept of altruism, with the degree of support measure used here tapping 'expressive' incentives. Yet both may be seen as measures of party attachment, even if they correlate poorly. Ideology is used as a type of 'process incentive', yet it might also have been used to measure the sort of policies – collective benefits – that a member works within the party to achieve. Process incentive measures – such as 'working at elections can be fun' – don't differ much on the face of it from cost measures, such as 'meetings can be tiring'. More work might be done on validating certain measures.

Our own use of the question 'Fine Gael would be more successful if more people like me were elected to the Dáil' to tap ambition gets some

TABLE 3
ESTIMATED GENERAL INCENTIVES MODEL OF ACTIVISM
PLUS ADDED VARIABLES

	Activism in Fine Gael
Process	0.05 (0.112)
Outcome	0.14 (0.000)
Collective benefits*efficacy	0.06 (0.054)
Costs	-0.08 (0.003)
Expressive	0.38 (0.000)
Norms	-0.03 (0.352)
Ideology	0.01 (0.639)
FF-FG different	0.08 (0.010)
SES	0.03 (0.299)
Time in party	0.02 (0.537)
Optimism	0.06 (0.054)
R ²	0.26
F	24.16
N (weighted)	1,110

Standardised regression coefficients, with p values in brackets.

Source: Fine Gael members study.

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validation from the fact that it correlates with members' reported wish to be selected as a candidate (a very skewed measure since only 12 per cent answered in the affirmative), but the correlation of 0.22 is hardly strong and Crewe's criticism, that it is essentially a measure of self-esteem, remains a reasonable one (Crewe, 1996). All this means that while the model has some power in predictive terms, questions can still be asked about what inferences might be drawn from it. There must also be some doubts about causal paths. While strength of commitment (or perceiving a difference between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil) may well encourage activism, surely activism could strengthen commitment (or perceiving a difference between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil). Whiteley and Seyd (1996) addressed this issue by using measures of commitment in one wave of a panel study to predict activism measured at a later wave but, while their results support their earlier analyses, the problem remains.⁵

Conclusions

This paper has used data from a survey of Fine Gael party members to test a set of conclusions about why people participate in political life. Seyd and Whiteley's work on British parties gave rise to their general incentives model of participation that combines the selective incentives of rational choice theory with some normative and expressive considerations. In general, their model fits the Fine Gael data with a fair degree of success, despite some expectations to the contrary. As we expected, there is little sign that ideological and policy incentives are important, although there must still be some question marks over the measures available in the policy area. However, there were some signs that members who appear to give a primary loyalty to the party rather than to an individual are more influenced by policy in deciding on their degree of activity in the party. Process incentives seemed generally quite weak, but there was more sign that political ambition influenced activism. However, the major factor in explaining activism is the degree of support for the party.

One alternative explanation, the SES model, adds nothing to what can be explained by the general incentives model. Nor does the length of time in the party contribute. Although the bivariate relationship between when people joined and how active they are is moderately strong, it appears that length of service strengthens incentives and/or adds to party commitment.

In general these results support Seyd and Whiteley's argument, based on several studies, that their model provides a general explanation of party activism. However, rather more needs to be done to validate some

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of the measures and establish the direction of some of the pathways before we can be sure that the model's predictions equate to explanations. Rational choice theory may not be enough, but the meaning of what has been added is not yet clear.

Notes

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1. The options were 'To get Fine Gael into government or keep it there', 'A belief in what Fine Gael stands for', 'A good way to meet interesting people and extend my social life', 'Opposition to Fianna Fáil', 'As a first step in a political career', 'Influence of family and/or friends'. The full questionnaire can be found at www.psa.tcd.ie/blueloyalty.
2. We followed Seyd and Whiteley in including only the interactive term in the regression model, and not including the collective benefit and personal influence terms separately. Normally the test of interaction is that the interaction term itself adds to the effect of the two terms separately. In fact, when both of the individual items and the interaction term are all included none of the three is significant in the analysis in Table 1, columns 1–3, and collective benefits are significant for the Conservatives in replications of columns 4, 5 and 7.
3. Education was measured as two dummy variables indicating those with no educational qualifications and those with some kind of third level qualification; class was measured also by two dummy variables, middle class (non-manual) and working class (manual) with farmers as the reference category.
4. An alternative formulation here which also included 'honesty' as a party difference provided a weaker effect with a standardized coefficient of only 0.05 ($p=0.057$).
5. A recent study by Finkel *et al.* testing a similar model in the context of protest activity also uses a panel design to get around the difficulty of showing that 'current perceptions relevant to rational choice theories are the cause, and not the result, of individual behaviours' (1998: 38). While results are encouraging, the study indicates that there were significant effects of behaviour on the attitudes supposed to cause it.

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