

Greece: an election that really makes a difference

THERE ARE elections in which landslides mean next to nothing, and elections in which the tiniest of majorities can make the hugest difference. Sunday's vote in Greece falls into the second category. As the polls suggested it would be, the contest was a cliffhanger in which the ruling Pasok socialists, after being behind for much of the evening, eventually prevailed by just 1 per cent over the opposition conservative New Democracy party. That wafer-thin margin, however, may have momentous consequences for Greece itself, for the European Union and the stability of the eastern Mediterranean.

The victory is above all a personal triumph for the Prime Minister, Costas Simitis. Most parties that have held power for 16 out of the previous 19 years face the voters expecting defeat. That Pasok has narrowly avoided this fate when New Democracy offered a perfectly credible alternative is a tribute to the sound policies and management of Mr Simitis since he succeeded Andreas Papandreou in 1996.

The Greece he inherited was unsure of its place in the world, a frequent source of exasperation to the EU, and a country whose endless quarrels with Turkey weakened the Nato alliance and destabilised the region. The Greece that enters the new millennium, by contrast, is a country at ease with itself, firmly committed to western

Europe, and enjoying calmer relations with Turkey than at any time in half a century. Voters may have been weary of many old faces in his government, and chafed at the slow pace of welfare and education reform. But these complaints were outweighed by respect for what the technocrat Mr Simitis has achieved, above all in the economy.

Resolute centrist policies have so reduced inflation and the budget deficit that Greece, to the unabashed pride of its people, qualifies for membership of the euro-zone, and almost certainly will be approved as the single currency's 12th member at the EU summit in June. Maintaining these standards will not be easy but, more clearly than ever, Greece is now part of the European mainstream.

Equally impressive has been the partial rapprochement with Turkey, less than popular with many voters, and which the conservatives dropped heavy hints they would slow down if they won power. Centuries of historic enmity cannot be unmade in a few months, but a more temperate stance by Athens has ended the crisis in the EU's relations with Turkey and greatly reduced tension in the east Mediterranean. Might not even better things be on the way now – who knows, even a Cyprus settlement?

Narrowly but wisely, Greek voters have heeded the old American adage: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.