

# Slight poll lead for Greek conservatives

By Kerin Hope in Athens

Greece's conservative opposition New Democracy party held a narrow lead over the governing Panhellenic Socialist Movement according to exit polls for yesterday's general election.

The unofficial estimates suggested that less than one percentage point separated the two main parties. The polls gave both New Democracy and Pasok over 41 per cent of the vote, with the KKE, the unreconstructed Greek communist party, trailing far behind with about 5 per cent.

Analysts said the frontrunning party would be almost certain of winning an outright majority in the 300-seat parliament. Greece's complex proportional election system is designed to prevent the need for a coalition government by transferring surplus votes to the leading party.

A win for New Democracy would mark a triumph for Costas Karamanlis, 43, who took over the party leadership three years ago amid infighting between its nationalist and liberal factions. The conservatives have been out of power for 16 of the past 19

years. But analysts said Mr Karamanlis's inexperience – he has never held even a deputy minister's post – would raise questions about whether his party could govern effectively.

Defeat would be a bitter disappointment for Costas Simitis, 64, the moderate Socialist prime minister who has steered Greece to the brink of entry to the eurozone.

Mr Simitis, who took over as prime minister four years ago, has adopted pro-market policies and shifted the party away from its nationalist past. He held a much higher approval rating in opinion polls than Mr Karamanlis throughout the campaign.

Analysts said voters appeared to have abandoned two small left-wing parties. The Left Coalition and Dikki were unlikely to win the minimum 3 per cent of the total vote required for representation in parliament.

Turnout was higher than average after an estimated 700,000 voters travelled back to villages and islands to cast their ballots. Both parties offered free air and bus tickets to supporters willing to make the journey.