

EU: the no-vote wins and ruling parties take a blow

Less than half of European voters show up at the polls

ALEXLEFF

The elections to the EU parliament have produced one clear winner: the abstainers. Indicators show a record low turnout of only 44.2 per cent for the EU as a whole. Participation among the new 10 member states was just 28 per cent. "Regrettably, Europe is too absent from the European elections in east and west," outgoing European parliament president Pat Cox told BBC News. While in theory last Sunday represented one of the biggest exercises of democracy in the world, only about 155 million of some 350 million eligible voters bothered to vote. The results show that centre right parties in the EU secured 36.9 parliamen-

tary seats, compared to 30.1 shared by EU socialists.

Another widespread trend was the heavy blow to existing national governments. Germany's governing Social Democrats suffered their worst results since World War II, with just 21.5 per cent of the vote. In France, the socialist party won 28.9 per cent, leading with a considerable margin ahead of president Jacques Chirac's Union for the Popular Movement. The governing left party in Poland, the largest of the new EU members, won just 9 per cent of the vote, with a turnout of just under 20 per cent.

The eurosceptics came out better than expected. In Britain, for exam-

ple, the UK Independence Party won 17 per cent, leaving the two leading parties for the first time ever with less than half of the vote between them.

The ruling Spanish socialists appear to have bucked the trend, winning 43.7 per cent. The result disproves the widespread opinion that José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government had only won national elections because of the March 11 terrorist attacks. The governing Catalan socialists beat the centre right party CiU, which recorded its worst results in 25 years. Voting participation in Spain was around 46 per cent, a low turnout when compared to other EU member states.



Parties in power in Germany, France and Poland did very badly

Two Britons killed in Baghdad bomb attack

At least 11 people were killed in a car bomb attack in central Baghdad yesterday.

Five of the dead worked for General Electric, the American power company. Two of them were British but the nationalities of the others was not known, although there were reports that they included French and US citizens. Dozens of people were injured when the bomb exploded in Tahrir Square, close to a convoy of contractors.

A policeman at the scene told the AFP news agency: "A suicide car bomber in a small Volkswagen Brazilia drove between the cars and

blew himself up." It was a calculated attack and comes when the US-led provisional authority is struggling to upgrade Iraq's electricity generating capacity to 6,000 megawatts as they pledged to do before the hand-over of sovereignty at the end of this month. The capacity is thought to be little over 4,000 megawatts at present.

A second car bomb was reported to have exploded near the town of Salman Pak southeast of Baghdad, killing four people. The previous day a suicide bomber killed at least seven Iraqis near a US base in the city.

RESIDENCY

Spanish government to deal with immigration bottleneck

The Spanish government has come up with an emergency plan to deal with the backlog of requests for residency permits by non EU-foreigners. This includes employing 267 more people at immigration offices, changing the appointments system and decentralising service provision. The changes should also reduce the long queues of people to be seen waiting out government buildings in Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, Málaga and Murcia. Until now, applicants have to wait up to six months just to get an appointment to begin renewing their residency or work permits. By the time the appointment is due, for many it is too late as their permits have expired and they become illegal through no fault of their own.

MACHISMO

Latin American women winning at work but not at home

Latin American women have made significant progress winning more rights in the workplace in recent decades, but macho attitudes mean they still do most of the work at home. These findings were announced at the 9th Regional Conference on Women organised by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Mexico City recently. Latin American women are now in a better situation than their counterparts in regions such as Africa or the Middle East and some parts of Eastern Europe. Progress has been mainly due to the repeal of explicitly sexist laws, to legislation to combat domestic violence and to the introduction of quota systems to ensure female representation in parliament. In the home, there has been less of a change however. "Women have entered the workplace, but men haven't gone into the kitchen," says Sonia Montañó, head of Women and Development at ECLAC.

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