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Europe's centre right celebrates resounding victory

By Tony Barber in Brussels

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Europe's **centre-right parties** on Monday celebrated a resounding election victory that underlined the resilience of the European model of welfare state capitalism in the face of the worst recession since the 1930s.

The centre-right emerged as the clear winner in **elections to the European parliament**, taking 265 seats in the 736-seat assembly, compared with 184 for socialists, 83 for centrist liberals, 50 for the Greens and 36 for the radical left.

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A strong showing for nationalists and the far right in countries such as Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands and **the UK** will not prevent the centre-right and other mainstream parties from maintaining their dominance over the parliament.

"Overall, the results are an undeniable victory for those parties and candidates that support the European project and want to see the European Union delivering policy responses to their everyday concerns," said José Manuel Barroso, the European Commission president, whose chances of securing a second five-year term were boosted by the results.

Apart from a record low turnout of 43.1 per cent, the most striking feature of the elections was **the failure of socialists or centre-left parties** in four of Europe's six largest countries – **France**, **Germany**, Italy and **Poland** – to persuade voters that the global financial crisis and recession represented a "crisis of capitalism" that justified a turn to the left.

In **Spain** and the UK, the other big two countries, the left was in power and punished accordingly – especially in Britain, where the **Labour government**, drowning in a scandal over politicians' expenses, achieved its lowest result in a nationwide election since 1910.

The strong performance of Poland's ruling Civic Platform party can be attributed partly to the fact that the global financial turmoil has not struck the country as fiercely as most of Europe.

But in France, Germany and Italy, voters preferred to stick with ruling centre-right parties, even though economic conditions are as severe as anything in living memory.

One reason is that centre-right leaders, alert to the risk of being portrayed as defenders of a heartless or irresponsible capitalist system, have sought to protect citizens against the worst effects of the recession by preserving jobs where possible and letting the welfare state take care of those in need.

Unemployment benefits, access to medical care and other forms of social expenditure, which come into effect automatically during a recession, form a large part of the €400bn fiscal stimulus that EU policymakers claim to have been implementing over the past six months.

This Franco-German model, criticised in the US and UK in the boom years as an unaffordable, bloated welfare system, has turned out to be exactly what most voters want during the recession.

As a result, even Germany's Social Democrats, though in coalition with the centre-right Christian Democrats, was unable to make any headway, taking a mere 21 per cent of the vote against 38 per cent for the CDU.

"It's a disappointing result. There's no other way to put it," said Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the SPD foreign minister, who will challenge Angela Merkel, the CDU chancellor, in September's national election.

The left's woes in France and Italy were compounded by internal divisions over how to combat the unorthodox but successful leadership styles of Nicolas Sarkozy, France's president, and Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's premier.

Martine Aubry, leader of France's opposition socialists, said: "The socialist party needs a profound renewal. It can't function any longer in a closed circuit."

Dario Franceschini, leader of Italy's opposition Democratic party, blamed the billionaire Mr Berlusconi's domination of Italian television. "We were David against Goliath, and Goliath doesn't always lose," he said.

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