

Taiwan's Ma has slim lead in final polls before election

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TAIPEI, Jan 3 — Incumbent Nationalist Ma Ying-jeou holds a slim lead in Taiwan's presidential election race as the final opinion polls are published, setting the stage for a tense last two weeks of a campaign being closely watched by the United States and China.

The January 14 election will determine whether Taiwan deepens economic integration with mainland China or embarks on a period of possibly fractious cross-Strait relations that could increase tension between Washington, its main backer, and Beijing, which has vowed to return Taiwan to its control.

Ma, seeking a second term, will square off against the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Tsai Ing-wen and People First Party candidate James Soong in the fifth presidential election since Taiwan's transition to democracy from a martial law dictatorship. The first direct presidential election was held in 1996.

Ma leads Tsai in most polls with Soong a distant third.

Ma is stressing stability and continuity from his policy of economic rapprochement with China, while Tsai has adopted a stance that seeks to engage China while preserving Taiwan's differences.

Today is the last day opinion polls can be published, according to Taiwan's election laws.

While a guide to voter sentiment, polls tend to be partisan, depending on the political affiliation of the media concerned, and the methodology sometimes idiosyncratic.

Two Nationalist-leaning papers, the United Daily News and China Times, put Ma ahead of Tsai by 44 per cent to 36 per cent and by 39.5 per cent to 36.5 per cent respectively in polls released today.

Soong, who leads an offshoot party of the Nationalists and could split their vote, is at 7 per cent and 5.8 per cent.

The rest of those polled were undecided, making them a potentially important force come polling day.

In earlier polls, two Nationalist-leaning TV stations — Now TV and TVBS — as well as the populist tabloid Apple Daily, which claims no political allegiance, put Ma ahead of Tsai by several per centage points.

But polls run by DPP-leaning research bodies, such as Taiwan Think Tank and Taiwan Brain Trust, have put the result much closer.

Taiwan's National Chengchi University's xFuture electronic exchange, where bets on the election in a virtual currency are traded, showed that as of January 3, Tsai would win 49.8 per cent of the vote versus Ma's 42.6 per cent and Soong's 7.5 per cent. — Reuters

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