

PP AHEAD OF OPPOSITION SOCIALIST IN POLL

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Less than two months before Spain's general election, the conservative Popular Party (PP) holds a comfortable 5.5 percentage point edge over the opposition socialists, according to an opinion poll published Sunday.

Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who is not running for re-election as the Popular Party's candidate, has been prime minister for two four-year terms. The party recently endorsed Aznar's hand-picked candidate, Mariano Rajoy, as his successor. Rajoy has served as deputy prime minister and in four different Cabinet posts, including the Interior Ministry, as his successor.

The survey in Madrid's El Pais daily predicted that if the election were held now, Rajoy's party would garner 42.5 percent of the vote against 37 percent for Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's Socialists.

Spaniards are expected to go to the polls March 14. In the last ballot 2000, the Popular Party won by taking 44.8 percent of the vote against 34.3 percent.

The Popular Party currently holds 183 seats in the 350-seat lower house of Parliament. Sunday's survey predicts that in the March elections it would win between 171 and 175 seats, one short of the absolute majority.

The United Left group would remain Spain's third-ranking party with 5.5 percent of the vote while the influential Catalan regional party Convergence and Union would bag 3.5 percent. The Basque Nationalist Party could win 1.5 percent.

Smaller parties would take up the remaining votes, according to the poll in which 3,000 people were surveyed Jan. 18, 19 and 20 by the private firm Opina. The survey had an error margin of 1.79 percent.

But the El Pais poll showed that the intention of vote for the Popular Party contrasted with 55.9 percent of Spaniards wishing to change the governing party.