

# *Panama Election to Test Martinelli's Hold on Power*

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Panama City, May 2 (RHC), – Panamanians vote for a new president on Sunday in the closest contest in a generation with opponents of President Ricardo Martinelli seeking to thwart the business tycoon's attempt to maintain an indirect grip on power.

Three candidates are just a few points apart in a campaign that has focused more on personality than policy.

Panama is a banking and trading hub and its successful canal has helped fuel the fastest economic growth in Latin America in recent years. Economic and social policies are expected to remain broadly in place whichever of the top candidates wins.

Opinion polls show ruling Democratic Change (CD) party candidate, Jose Domingo Arias, whose running mate is Martinelli's wife, neck and neck with moderate left-wing ex-Panama City mayor, Juan Carlos Navarro, of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD).

Just behind, in third place, is the Panamenista Party's, Juan Carlos Varela, the vice president. Varela's support helped Martinelli to get elected in 2009, but the two later fell out.

Martinelli, a supermarket magnate who won the presidency in 2009, is barred by law from running for re-election.

All three candidates pledge to continue large infrastructure projects, such as expanding Panama City's new metro, and ongoing social programs.

Instead of promising major policy changes, both Navarro and Varela say they are more transparent than Martinelli, whose administration has faced allegations that the public works boom he presided over was tainted by corruption.

The winner, elected by a simple majority on Sunday, will have to manage strong but slowing growth, adhere to a strict new fiscal responsibility law, and oversee the multi-billion dollar expansion of the Panama Canal, which briefly stalled earlier this year in a dispute with the building consortium.

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