

With a month to go until Election Day, a new breakdown of poll numbers show President Barack Obama has built important leads in key communities where he needs to win big in November. Perhaps even more important, Obama has opened up leads in important swing counties and in some counties that usually tend to lean toward the GOP.

The analysis, done by examining Pew Research Center polling data through the [Patchwork Nation](#) demographic/geographic breakdown of counties in partnership with American University, suggests a complicated path to victory for Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney in the closing weeks of the campaign.

While most polls look at overall national figures or slices of the electorate, the Patchwork Nation breakdown looks at how the candidates are doing in 12 types of counties – from the largely suburban [Monied Burbs](#) to rural agricultural [Tractor Country](#). That breakdown of the Pew poll numbers reveals two major trends:

- President Obama has grown his margins in big city and collegiate counties – places Patchwork Nation calls the [Industrial Metropolis](#) and [Campus and Careers](#). Big margins in those core Democratic counties are critical to President Obama's reelection chances.
- Obama now leads in two important and heavily populated county types the wealthy [Monied Burbs](#) and the more exurban [Boom Towns](#). Together those counties hold some 130 million people and are heavily located in important swing states.

The poll was done before last week's presidential debate, but suggests some key points to consider as the campaign enters the stretch run.

The numbers, all among likely voters, suggest that Romney in the coming debates may want to position himself as a moderate on key policy questions to try and win more moderate voters over – something he seemed to do last week. Those suburban and ex-urban voters tend to be more moderate in their politics overall. But these numbers also indicate pre-debate Obama had built up a solid lead overall and has shored up his base.

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Winning the Burbs

The [Monied Burbs](#), in beige on the map above and mostly based around big cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago and Cleveland, are always key to presidential elections. In recent elections they have tended to lean slightly Democratic, but Republicans can win the White House if they can keep the margins close enough.

George W. Bush did just that in his presidential races – he lost the Burbs by 3 percentage points in 2000 and 1 percentage point in 2004 and still won the presidency both times.

Community Type	% Obama	% Romney	Population
Monied 'Burbs	52%	42%	69 Million
Minority Central	55%	7%	14 Million
Evangelical Epicenters	38%	58%	14 Million
Tractor Country	N/A	N/A	2 Million
Campus and Careers	60%	36%	13 Million
Immigration Nation	46%	45%	20 Million
Industrial Metropolis	71%	25%	54 Million
Boom Towns	51%	45%	60 Million
Service Worker Centers	32%	58%	31 Million
Emptying Nests	41%	52%	12 Million
Military Bastions	51%	45%	9 Million
Mormon Outposts	25%	69%	2 Million

The latest Pew polling data, however, indicate that Obama leads Romney by nearly 10 percentage points among likely voters in the Burbs. Romney needs to bring that margin down to a more manageable number. How can he do that? By talking in the moderate, less-partisan tones that tend to resonate with the Burbs on things like education and even health care.

There are already some signs Romney is on this track doing this.

In recent week's Romney has made a point of mentioning his Massachusetts healthcare plan, which he has avoided talking about for large parts of the campaign. "I think throughout this campaign as well, we talked about my record in Massachusetts, don't forget – I got everybody in my state insured," [he told an NBC reporter](#). There were [similar, softer comments from Romney last week](#) at a forum on education.

The debates offer a chance for Romney to push forward on this more moderate approach to his policy ideas. In the first presidential debate last week he sounded very moderate, particularly in backing off from parts of his tax cuts proposals.

Strengthening in the Obama Base

The numbers in this survey suggest Romney will need to get the Burbs as close as he can because the data also show a solidification of Obama support in the places he needs it.

The latest Pew numbers show that Obama leads in the big city [Industrial Metropolis](#) counties by more than 40 percentage points and that he leads in the collegiate [Campus and Career](#) counties by more than 20 percentage points. Those margins are actually

slightly higher than the final tallies from the 2008 election, which Obama won in a landslide.

The bump in these counties may well have come from the Democratic convention, which was full of reminders of what the Obama team considered its biggest accomplishments – from auto industry aid to health care reform to his recent executive order of immigration. Those point were meant to fire-up Obama’s supporters.

Those Industrial Metropolis counties in particular tend to be very important to Democrats because they hold a lot of voters. If a Democratic candidate wins them by a large amount, it can be tough for his opponent to make up the difference elsewhere.

Romney has his base areas as well, particularly the socially conservative [Evangelical Epicenters](#), where these numbers show he holds a 22 percentage-point lead, but there are a few points of concern there. First that’s smaller than the margin by which Sen. John McCain won those counties in 2008 – he captured them by some 33 percentage points. More of a concern for Romney, those counties are more heavily based in non-swing states and they also tend to be less densely populated.

A Surprising Split

For Romney, one of the brightest spots in this set of numbers is the big lead he has over Obama in the small town [Service Worker Center](#) counties, some 25 percentage points. That’s a huge lead in those Republican-leaning counties – bigger than the margins George W. Bush has in them when he won in 2000 and 2004 – and many of those counties are spread around states like Ohio and Wisconsin.

But working against that big margin in those counties for Romney is the lead Obama has in this poll in the much more densely populated, exurban [Boom Town](#) counties. Obama leads by about 7 percentage points in those places, which usually lean Republican but which also have been hammered by the housing crunch.

If that Boom Town margin is real and Obama can hold onto it even after his weak debate performance last week it would make a victory all but certain for him.

As all pollsters like to say, these numbers represent a snapshot in time. And small sample sizes for some of these types mean there are large margins of error possible here, particularly in county types with very small samples sizes like the Military Bastions and Tractor Country counties.

Still, these numbers do offer an assessment of where Obama and Romney are as they head into home stretch of the campaign. Both candidates will likely be reaching for the middle, but for different reasons and with different objectives.

If Obama’s base is as locked in as these numbers suggest, any play he makes for voters in the center is more of a luxury – a way to try and lockdown a second term. For Romney,

after a few hard weeks, a play for centrist voters looks like it may be more a question of trying to find a path to winning in November.

METHODOLOGY: The Pew Research Center conducted polls with registered voters September 12-15. For each respondent in the polls, zip code data was collected. These data were assigned one of the twelve community types described in Patchwork Nation. In the September poll, respondents were asked about their support for President Obama or Governor Romney. Responses to these questions were compared for each community type. For each poll and community type, the margin between Obama and Romney was calculated by subtracting the percentage supporting the Republican/Romney from the percentage supporting Democrat/Obama. The margin of error in each community type and poll is dependent on the size of that particular sample.