

As the 2012 presidential race heads for the home stretch, poll after poll shows it is a dead heat. Some pollsters and analysts have even suggested that one candidate might win the popular vote while the captures the 270 electoral votes needed to win the White House.

A new analysis of the latest Pew Research Center presidential poll using the [Patchwork Nation](#) demographic/geographic breakdown of U.S. counties suggests that split decision is a very real possibility – with Republican nominee Mitt Romney carrying the popular vote and President Barack Obama winning the electoral college.

While the overall PRC polling numbers show a nail-biting [47% to 47% tie](#), the candidates have strengths in different types of counties. And the way those counties are spread across the remaining battleground states – particularly in the Great Lakes region – suggests an electoral college advantage for President Obama.

To be clear, there is not certain answer about Election Day in these numbers. Tuesday night figures to be long one for election watchers. But the figure here point to an advantage for Obama in key Midwestern terrain.

### Who Leads Where?

One Patchwork Nation group in particular stands out in the new Pew poll, the aging [Emptying Nest](#) counties. Those counties are full of large numbers of people aged 55 and over and according to these Pew numbers Obama has built up a large advantage in them.

Kerry lost those counties by 13 percentage points in 2004, in this survey Obama leads in them by 11 percentage points, a net margin change of 24 percentage points. In the last Pew survey in mid-October Obama has an even larger lead in those counties – 19 percentage points.

That could have huge ramifications Tuesday especially considering the way the rest of the numbers look.

The latest Pew numbers are remarkable in that, for the most part, they are very close to mirroring the actual results from 2004, using Patchwork Nation’s 12 county types. In fact, – in seven of 10 types (two types had samples in the pool that were too small to report) there are changes in margins of 5 points or less.

Obama does better in comes places than Sen. John Kerry did in that election and Romney does better than some of President George W. Bush’s numbers, but the figures are quite close.

County Type	Kerry 04	Bush 04	Obama 12	Romney 12	04/12 Margin Difference
Boom Towns	41	58	41	55	+3 D
Campus Careers	55	44	53	41	+1 D
Emptying Nests	43	56	52	41	+24 D

Evangelical Epis	34	65	30	68	+7 R
Immigration Nat.	45	54	43	44	+8 D
Industrial Metro	63	36	64	32	+5 D
Military Bastions	43	56	42	51	+4 D
Minority Central	48	51	45	47	+1 R
Monied Burbs	50	49	47	46	0
Mormon Outposts	18	80	NA	NA	NA
Service Workers	43	55	42	53	+1 D
Tractor Country	68	30	NA	NA	NA

NA= Sample too small to report

In short, President Obama's leads in his core areas of support, the big city counties ([Industrial Metropolis](#)) and college towns ([Campus and Careers](#)) are large and solid – better than Kerry's numbers. And Republican nominee Mitt Romney has built up a big lead in the socially conservative counties ([Evangelical Epicenters](#)), with big margins in more exurban areas ([Boom Towns](#)) and in the rural small towns ([Service Worker Centers](#)). His margins in those places are similar to Bush's 2004 numbers.

The margin in the crucial wealthy suburban counties ([Monied Burbs](#)) is essentially exactly where it was in 2004, a small lead for Obama, just as Kerry had eight years ago.

That brings us back to the Emptying Nests.

### **The Strategic Emptying Nests**

Look at the map below. The light green areas on the map are the Emptying Nest counties. They are based heavily in three states that many figure to be key Tuesday night – Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio.



How crucial are those Emptying Nest counties to those states? They hold 32 percent of the population in Iowa, 20 percent in Wisconsin and 11 percent of population in Ohio. Enough, in other words, to swing a close state into a candidate's column.

There are a few reasons to believe those counties, particularly in the Midwest, could be leaning toward Obama.

They hold a lot of manufacturing jobs – and manufacturing job retirees – particularly jobs with connections to the auto industry. Romney has been beaten up by the Obama campaign for the editorial he penned for the New York Times about the U.S. auto industry, [Let Detroit Go Bankrupt](#).

And while polls show Romney is doing well with 65-years-plus voters, remember a lot of the people in these counties are 55-and-over. That would place many of in the age range of wondering about entitlements like Medicare and Social Security.

How real is President Obama's lead in those counties? Is it that big? Those are valid questions. Other polls Patchwork Nation has examined do not show the same advantage for Obama in those counties – though they show Obama with larger advantages in other places.

But Obama's edge doesn't have to be 11 points in the Emptying Nests to be substantial, in those states especially. Those key Midwestern states – Ohio, Iowa and Wisconsin – are short on the Evangelical Epicenters and Boom Towns that are big parts of Romney's advantage.

In other states the former Massachusetts governor will likely ride those counties to big wins.

Does that mean we are certain to have a split decision on Tuesday night? Not at all. Either man could win both the popular and electoral vote – that's certainly how it usually goes. And remember this poll, like all polls, is a snapshot of a moment in time and attitudes and numbers can change.

But these numbers indicate the underlying dynamics are there for a popular/electoral, Romney/Obama vote split and it lies in the Emptying Nest counties of the Midwest