Thesis Prospectus

In 2024, YouGov conducted a survey that asked 8,059 respondents if they had regretted their vote in any previous presidential election. The results showed that 11% of the sample had never voted, and 66% of them had never felt regret. However, 15% stated that they have experienced regret in their vote choice, and 7% stated they were not sure. While this may seem like a small margin of error for voters, many elections have been decided by much less. For example, the Pew Research Center (2021) states that the 2020 presidential election was decided by a 4-point margin in the popular vote. In 2016, the importance of even a single percentage point can also be seen, as U.S. News (2016) reports that six states were decided by less than 2 points. With this in mind, it is clear that any voter regret can have serious implications for the future governance of the United States, which is why it becomes imperative to understand how regret manifests and what effects it has on future elections.

When looking to determine whether voters have regretted their choice in previous elections, it is relevant to review approval and confidence ratings and whether they have declined over time. Given that many individuals will not directly admit they regret their vote choice, certain organizations, such as the Pew Research Center, measure regret in this way. This can be seen in a poll done by the Pew Research Center (2026), which states that voter confidence in Donald Trump has fallen by 8% from February 2025 to January 2026. This serves as an indicator that there could be a sentiment of regret, specifically amongst Republicans who make up the majority of the drop in confidence, as opposed to Democrats. Gallup (2025) also conducted polling to examine approval ratings during Donald Trump's first year in office, with results showing a 47% approval rating in January 2025 that shrank to 36% by December 2025. When examining these results through a partisan lens, it can be seen that Democrats saw a drop in

approval by 3%, Independents saw a drop of 21%, and Republicans experienced the smallest drop of 2%. In this specific case, it is apparent that Independents were the most capable of changing their opinion on the candidate and may also be more likely to feel regret.

With this being said, these results are not unique to the Trump administration and can also be found in the Biden administration's approval ratings, which Gallup (2025) reports went from 57% in January 2021 to 40% at the end of his term in January 2025. In terms of Joe Biden's confidence ratings, the Pew Research Center (2023) states that their polling shows the public lost confidence in his abilities in multiple areas related to his job functions, which, at times, went down by up to 24 percentage points within approximately two years. This decline was seen especially amongst Democrats as opposed to Republicans.

The aforementioned examples show that there has been a 11% cumulative drop in approval ratings and an 8% drop in confidence level during Donald Trump's first year in office during his second term. When looking at Joe Biden's term, a similar trend can be seen, as there was a 17% cumulative drop in approval over his four years in office and a drop of up to 24% in certain measures of confidence. Given this information, it reasonably follows that some portion of voters will feel regret in their decision to vote the way they did in the previous election.

Given this opportunity for regret, it follows that significant research has examined the psychology behind regret and its effect on the electorate and voting behavior. Some examples of this research can be observed by looking at the work of Blais and Kilibarda (2016), Bol et al. (2018), Tideman (1985), and Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974). However, this research leaves us wanting when it comes to understanding how repeated regret occurs when voting for a political candidate. Specifically, I am interested in observing the behavior of individuals who have voted for a candidate in a previous election, regretted that vote afterwards, and then gone on to vote for

the same candidate again in a subsequent election. One factor that may be considered when looking at this behavior is when the individual realizes they are feeling regret, and whether the amount of time affects whether they will repeat their vote for the same candidate in the future. This may speak to their ability to analyze outcome feedback properly. According to Creyer and Ross (1999), if an individual correctly interprets outcome feedback, it causes them to become more risk-averse, meaning they would be less likely to repeat their vote choice. Additionally, observing the time it takes for someone to regret their vote would likely shed light on why regret formed, whether it was an immediate reaction, if it evolved over time due to the outcome of the election, or if it was due to an event or events that occurred after the candidate took office, if they were elected. In turn, this would likely give information as to what motivated the repeated vote after regret was felt the first time. For example, if the regret was experienced after their candidate implemented a policy they did not approve of in one area, it could follow that the subsequent vote for the same person was due to the fact that this policy issue has been reframed or a new issue has become more important to them.

While the aforementioned information may or may not be found in every case, I am most interested in observing how the time it took an individual to experience regret the first time affected their next vote for the same candidate and what this suggests about how they evaluate outcome feedback and implement it in future decisions. This would also pull from research that discusses memory based models of information processing which would allow us to determine if recency and frequency impacts an individual's decision to repeat a vote choice for a candidate they have felt regret for previously.

In order to measure this behavior, I propose doing an experiment where an individual is shown two candidates to pick from and then evaluating their levels of regret after this decision at

various points in time. The information given on each candidate would not include political affiliation in order to isolate the importance of time and outcome feedback. In this experiment a candidate would decide between two candidates and then be shown negative outcome feedback at different points throughout their candidates time in office. The rate at which this is shown would vary as some participants would be shown information more frequently than others and some would be shown information closer to the next election than others. After this is completed, respondents would be asked to cast a new vote where their choices are between a new candidate and the one they previously voted for. This would then allow us to ask the participant how they feel about their vote choice after both vote selections and evaluate the role that recency and frequency had on this behavior.