The first tuesday after the first monday in November should be one of the most important days in America, yet it isn’t. Year after year there is consistant low voter turnouts compared to other first world countries. At our absolute best we could get close to 62% turnout from eligible voters, and that was from Obama’s run in 2008, an election cycle he is well known for creating an energized base (FairVote). Four years later in 2012 the turnout drops to 58% (FairVote). All of this is just presidential election years, but in the midterm elections it is a lot worse, with 2014 being the lowest year percentage wise since 1942 at 36% (FairVote). Since voter registration is an individual responsibility in the United States, only 65% of the voting-age population is registered, compared with 96% in Sweden and 93% in the United Kingdom (Pew). The reason why this is a problem is because there could be disadvantaged groups who statistically have low voter turnouts, causing them to be underrepresented in not only the federal level, but state and local too. To combat this and increase the turnout, various types of laws and incentives should be put in place to not only motivate people to vote, but could also motivate them to be more informed.

When the United States of America was formed, the requirement to vote was that you had to be a 21 year old white male who owned some kind of property. Obviously limiting it to only 21 year old white males did not last long, but the one part of the original requirements that was dropped first interestingly enough was the property owner law. Back in the late 18th century
early 19th century it was smart to do this because you know that every eligible voter would be interested and engaged in politics if they would be directly affected by new policies. For instance, a man who owns a store front would be motivated to look for politicians who would help the man out the most, whether it is from better trade deals to other countries to tax hikes on businesses. Limiting voters today with a similar concept would be foolish, there are simply too many people in our country and the law is simply too archaic to be put into modern use. It is the principle that needs to be looked at.

Now, a big problem with the incentivisation of voters is that the government has made turnout buying illegal for the most part, which is when one is compensated for the act of participation alone (Shineman). This did not stop many private companies from attempting special “giveaways” on election day to increase voter turnout and participation. Companies like Starbucks gave away free coffee to those who have voted, while others included free tattoo removals and even free medical marijuana in some dispensaries (Shineman). This is interesting because private companies are losing money, albeit for a day, to incentivize voter participation. I think many of these companies genuinely care about improving the election cycle. Instead of rewards, what if companies or organizations bus people into polling centers who would have otherwise not voted due to the distance.

Now, there are a few negative aspects that one has to consider when you are talking about voter incentivisation through compensation. Firstly and problematically, the US government does not like it when companies and institutions give things away to voters, and tries to stop it when
they can. Another problem with this form of incentivization is that it could encourage non-voters, who are less politically interested and involved than regular voters, to vote on candidates that they might not know just for the sake of voting. This is a big problem because low information voters are more damaging to the country than not voting at all.

A counter to this argument comes from Victoria Shineman, a political scientist from the University of Pittsburgh. She argues that “people decide whether to invest in becoming informed about politics within the context of whether or not they expect to participate in the election”. What she means is that once a person has made the decision to vote, he or she would be motivated to seek out information about the election. She found this out when she took a survey of 350 people, but only told half that they would get a 25 dollar prepaid visa card as a reward if they cast a ballot. She then decided to give half of the participants who has the opportunity to get the 25 dollars additional information, like all of the different ways one can cast a ballot in San Francisco and 2 emails reminding the participants of the upcoming election. The other half was the control, which meant that these people were not given any financial incentive, but half of these people would only receive the information package. She discovered that the people who had the $25 dollar incentive plus the additional information were the most likely to vote out all the participants. The whole group was surveyed again after the election and it was found that the half that had the financial incentive “were better able to identify the ideological positions of the candidates competing in the three electoral contests, and were more likely to watch the debates between the candidates” (Shineman). Even though paying people like this is for the most part prohibited, it still proves that the idea of increased incentivisation is effective.
Another strategy that could be used to increase voter turnout is making election day a federal holiday. One of the main reasons many Americans don’t vote is simply because they can’t, or is at least very difficult to do so, especially for lower income Americans who would have less leisure time than someone wealthier. People have to work, take care of their families, and other obligations. The biggest group that would be affected are the low-income Americans, because instead of having to work for long hours, they could spend time with family and go vote. Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders wants to create a “Democracy Day” to encourage groups like young people and low-income Americans to vote, saying that it unacceptable in today's democracy to have some 80% of these people fail to vote (Sanders). Another idea similar to this one is to combine election day with veterans day to make one large national holiday. People can celebrate and honor our vets by participating in the election and have a good time too. However, this would be difficult to implement because the traditional election day is not set on a specific day but is the first tuesday after the first monday in November.

If a person has the opportunity to vote but chooses not too, then chances are that person believes (and perhaps rightfully so) that their vote is irrelevant when you have over tens of millions of people whom also vote. The incentives that were discussed earlier, when added with real life laws to increase voter turnout, like same-day registration, would not matter if the person believes that it would be pointless to vote, or simply doesn’t care enough about one of the most critical things our founders fought for. Unsurprisingly, over “66% of eligible voters turned out to the polls in the nation's 12 most competitive states in 2012, but only 57% did in the nation's 39 other states” (FairVote). States that are more competitive like Ohio and Florida are much more
important compared to states like Texas where you know, almost for a certainty, that it would go Republican, or a state like Wyoming where the population is so small that it only has 3 electoral college votes. There are probably many potential democrats in Texas but since there is such a large republican presence in the state they might feel that their vote is pointless in the grand scheme of things.

When the 13 original colonies revolted against the British, one of the chief complaints was that they were not represented in parliament and had no opportunity to elect their own leaders into their highest form of government. Our founding fathers thought that having the opportunity to have a true democracy was worth fighting a revolution against the most powerful country in the world at the time. Countless men have died for this right, yet we consistently see low turnouts and enthusiasm in our elections. It is widely known that the more you lean to one side of the aisle the more likely you are to vote and be involved in politics, which is why there seems to be many popular candidates who are either very polarized, or right/left wing like Cruz and Sanders. While it is hard to convince people that their vote is worth something, what we can do is try to make the process as easy as possible. As stated earlier, there are many attempts by both the state and federal level to increase the voter turnout, like same-day registration and mail-in ballots. This is a step in the right direction but more needs to be done in order to better represent groups like lower-income Americans and the youth. Strategies like various incentives and making election day a national holiday should considered for the future. People all the time complain about American politics, but when you have less than half the country actually vote during a presidential election, maybe something different needs to be done.
Bibliography:


