Why a Two-Party System for the U.S.?

Defining Party Systems:

(A) Two-Party System: Two major parties within a legislature and executive cabinet.

(B) Multi-Party System: Three or More major parties within a legislature and executive cabinet

Defining a Major Party: A Major Party is a party that meets the following qualifications:

(a) a party with a viable chance to win elections
(b) a party that is able to be elected to and control a respectable # of seats within a legislature
(c) a party that is able to be appointed to some cabinet positions in an executive branch cabinet position (i.e. Secretary of State, Defense Minister, Finance Minister, Secretary of Labor, etc.)
(d) Overall, a party has to be able to participate in the governing and law-making process - not just be a “protest party” with no viable shot to win elections or be part of the policy making process

All Advanced and truly open democracies have two Large parties;

The DIFFERENCE is that:

In a TWO-party system: The two large parties are the ONLY MAJOR parties.

In a MULTI-party system: The two large parties, PLUS a handful of SMALL parties are considered major parties

What Accounts for this difference? Electoral Systems

Two party and Multi-party systems each have a different method of elections for election candidates for legislatures

(1) Two-Party Systems have the: Majority/Plurality System

This includes:

(a) candidate block ballots: these are candidates where voters choose an INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATE, NOT a whole party.

(b) Single-member Districts: Voters can only vote for one candidate running in each Legislative District. ONLY ONE candidate will be able to represent each Legislative District in that legislature.
Quite simply, the candidate with the single most votes, period, will win the election and be the ONE candidate representing the district in that legislature.

That candidate can win with either a MAJORITY of the vote (51% or more), or with a PLURALITY of the vote (the largest single minority share of the total vote). Either way, the candidate with the most votes wins. The 2nd place finisher gets nothing.

This creates a “winner take all” mentality; voters realize this and, thus, are motivated to cluster their votes between the candidates from the TWO LARGE parties. They will often choose the candidate from the large party closest to their ideological persuasion - the “lesser of two evils.” This is often known as “Strategic Voting.”

Voters realize that to vote for a small party with NO chance to win the election is, in essence, “throwing away” their vote.

Thus, Majority/Plurality Systems = Two-Party Systems - The U.S., U.K, India, Australia, and, until the mid-1990’s, Canada.

(2) Multi-Party Systems have the PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION (PR) SYSTEM

This is based on the following: (we shall only discuss the most simple, straightforward version of PR - List Proportional Representation)

(a) Party Bloc Ballots: On a typical PR ballot, all the parties (ranging from 3 to 7 to sometimes more on a ballot) will submit CANDIDATE LISTS for each ballot (a different ballot with different candidate lists for each legislative district)

Voters will then be asked to choose one ENTIRE PARTY from their ballot, NOT INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES. By selecting that one party, voters are voting for all the candidates on that party list.

(b) Multi-member Districts: Each district will produce a multiple number of candidates from each legislative district to represent that district in the legislature, not just one.

(c) The number of SEATS a party gets for that district is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to the % of VOTES it receives in that district.

EXAMPLE: Three parties, Parties A, B and C submit candidate lists in a legislative district that provides Six Seats from that particular district. Each party is different in this district in terms of size and past electoral success in this district. Party A is large and traditionally runs well. It submits 6 candidates. Party B is overall a large party, but still does not run quite as successfully in this district. It will provide a list of 4 candidates. Party C is a small party that expects to get very little of the vote. It will submit only 2 candidates.

Upon the voters voting for whole parties: Party A = 51% of the vote
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Party B = 32%  
Party C = 17%

Yes, party A got the most votes and will, thus, get the most seats. But getting the most seats does NOT mean getting ALL the seats.

Each Party on this ballot will get the number of SEATS directly proportional to the % of VOTES it received.

Thus, Party A = 3 seats (out of 6 possible candidates) for this district (51% of vote)  
Party B = 2 seats (out of 4 possible candidates) for this district (32% of vote)  
Party C = 1 seat (out of 2 possible candidates) for this district (17% of vote)

So even a small party like Party C, with a paltry and low 17% of the vote, still gets one seat - Party C gets some representation.

A small party that has no chance of winning DOES NOT HAVE TO WIN. As long as the party gets some votes, it will proportionally win some seats.

If Party C, more or less, has this kind of outcome in EVERY legislative district, it will be able to win a respectable number of seats in the legislature.

This means that one of the large parties will take notice and pay more attention to party C. That large party will often then ask a small party like C to form a governing alliance, or Coalition Govt. with the large party.

This means that a small party like Party C will be appointed to some cabinet positions in that country’s executive branch/cabinet govt.

This means that a small party like C will be able to take part in the governing and law-making process. Thus, Small parties like Party C can still be MAJOR parties.

Thus, PR Systems = Multi-Party Systems - the Majority of Western and Eastern European Countries, Japan, Israel, most Latin American democracies, etc.

In Majority/Plurality systems, because of the “winner-take-all” mentality of the single member district, candidates from small parties would never have a chance to win outright and get the most votes. Thus, a small party will control VERY LITTLE, if any, seats. Small parties, therefore, will be nothing more than “protest” parties with no chance of actually helping to govern and make policy.

However, in a PR system, a small party, as long as it receives some minimum % of votes can still win enough seats to make it a party that does take part in governing and policy making.

THE KIND OF ELECTION SYSTEM A COUNTRY HAS WILL DETERMINE THE NUMBER OF MAJOR PARTIES (TWO PARTY OF MULTI-PARTY) IT HAS!
Models of Democracy:

(1) Majoritarian Democracy (aka, Westminster Model of Democracy)

- Based on the concept of majority rule with minority rights
- Governing should be limited to strict political majorities
- Political minorities have the right and freedom to oppose and protest the laws and policies of the majority
- However, such political minority groups are limited to opposing – not much beyond that
- Minority groups usually cannot participate in the governing or law making
- Designed to create stability, efficiency and expediency in the governing process
- Also designed to create a clear set of choices for voters; one party becomes the majority, the other party the minority; that minority party is limited to protesting; However, that same party
- can viably win the next election and then take part in governing, etc.

Institutional Features of Majoritarianism

- The following are governmental/institutional characteristics commonly found or likely in majoritarian-majoritarian-like democracies

(1A) Concentration of Executive Power

- Based on single party cabinets
- The majority party in the parliament (under a parliamentary system) will not have a need or motivation to include a small party in any coalition cabinet, thus, that majority party can have the entire cabinet consist of only members of the majority (PM’s) party
- Periodically, a party with a very large plurality (near majority) of seats will invite just one small party to complete the governing majority – These are called minimum winning coalitions, or bare-majority cabinets
- Single party cabinets are also common in Presidential systems (U.S.)
- This means that policy making and governing within the executive branch is limited to just the majority party

(1B) Asymmetrical Bi-Cameralism

- Based on legislatures with unequal chambers
- One chamber (house) of a legislature is more powerful and supreme to the other chamber with regard to powers, functions and legislative authority
- Other legislatures consist of just one chamber (uni-cameral legislatures)
- Either way, legislative action and governing is limited to one chamber of a legislature – usually the majority party in that legislature

(1C) Two-Party Systems

- Please see notes on party systems/electoral systems
(1D) **Majority/Plurality Systems**

(1E) **Unitary Systems**

- Please see Danziger and Baradat Readings

(1F) **Unwritten, Uncodified Constitutions**

- Constitutions that are, in actuality, not constitutions
- These are loose collections of **Parliamentary** law easily subject to change
  (requires just a simple majority vote from the legislature — usually the **majority party** in the legislature)
- Or can be actual constitutions, but that are also easy to change, or amend — again, often requires just a simple majority from the legislature
(2) Consensus Democracy

Concept: Based on the idea that democracy and democratic political systems should be based on POWER SHARING. That is, governing and the policy/law making process should be done by a CONSENSUS of groups and political parties within and outside a legislature and the executive cabinet govt.

Political minority groups (i.e., ethnic minorities, regional minorities, partisan minorities within a legislature, etc.) should not just have the right to express dissent. Their political participation should go beyond simply voting in elections, and expressing their views. They should have more than just “protest potential”. Minority political groups and parties should be able to take part in actually governing and policy making.

Thus, Consensus Democracy = Governing based on accommodation of minority groups; Consensus Democracy = Power sharing between a DIVERSE PLURALITY of groups

The Following are common and frequent characteristics and institutional features that are more likely to be found in consensus-like Democracies (NOTE: Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland are classic examples of Consensus Democracy. There are other countries that are not full-fledged Consensus Democracies. Still many of these Democracies are more on the Consensus-side of the Democracies “fence” than they are on the majoritarian side.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSENSUS DEMOCRACY:

(1) Executive Power-Sharing: Quite simply, these are multi-party cabinets in an executive branch cabinet govt. Usually, these take the form of COALITION CABINETS. Please refer to your notes on Coalition Cabinets/Govts. These are alliances between several parties that are based from the combining of parliamentary seats following a parliamentary election for the purposes of establishing a working, governing majority in both the parliament and, in turn, in the executive branch. Again, refer to your earlier notes on this for more detail and for the specific types of coalition cabinets that exist. Above all, know that this feature is associated with Consensus Democracy due to the fact that Coalition Cabinets are about POWER SHARING between different parties in an executive branch cabinet govt.

(2) Symmetrical Bi-Cameralism: Symmetrical means “equal” or to have parity. B-Cameralism means “TWO HOUSES or CHAMBERS” that are equally part of the legislature. Essentially, this means that Both houses of a legislature are EQUAL with regard to powers, functions, legislative authority and policy making power. For a proposed law (bill) to pass the U.S. Congress, that bill must clear past BOTH the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate. For a bill to pass the Belgian Parliament, that bill must clear both the Chamber of Representatives and the Belgian Senate. Likewise, the Swiss Parliament must have both the National Council and Council of States (Cantons) pass legislation before it becomes law. Both chambers of equal bi-cameral legislatures often must both agree on amendments to constitutions and other acts. Again, this characteristic is associated with consensus democracy because of POWER SHARING between both houses of a legislature.
(3) **Multi-Party Systems.** Please refer to earlier extension notes that discuss multi-party systems.

(4) **Proportional Representation (PR) Systems.** Again, refer to the same set of extension notes that give full detail as to what PR systems are and how they function as an election method - that is, a system of electing representatives to a legislature. Know that PR systems = Multi-Party Systems. And also, know that Multi-Party Systems = Coalition Govts. and Executive Power Sharing. What does this all mean? POWER SHARING between different parties. Voters and candidates of small and minority parties have a chance to take part and share in the governing and policy making process.

(5) **Federalism:** Please see both the Danziger readings (CH.7) and Baradot readings to get the full detail on Federal systems. Know that Federal systems provide POWER SHARING between Natl. Govts. and Regional (state, provincial, local, etc.) govt.

(6) **Codified and Written Constitutions:** These are constitutions that are formally written and "etched in stone", so to speak. They are really difficult to change or amend (often require 2/3 SUPERMAJORITY votes in legislature or greater). That means that a CONSENSUS of parties and factions within BOTH houses of a legislature can SHARE POWER and decide by consensus on whether or not to change the constitution. Usually, Symmetrical Bi-Cameralism = Codified Constitutions.

The Following are characteristics, traits and policy and political "results" of Consensus Democracy:

(a) more women in govt. - both in legislatures and executive cabinets

(b) Higher levels of public govt. spending in the budget
(c) Lower Imprisonment rates
(d) More narrow gap between incomes and socio-economic class
(e) "Kinder and Gentler" Foreign Policies: Less per capita spending on military/defense budgets, higher per capita budgetary spending on foreign aid and economic development assistance to developing LDC's - both as % of GDP.