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, straight forward 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!