Elections for Direction, Sortition for Judgment: A New Model of Bicameral Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a new model of bicameral sortition democracy that rethinks the division of labor between elected and randomly selected bodies. Existing bicameral proposals either give sortition chambers weak or co-equal authority, limiting their ability to realize the epistemic promise of deliberative democracy. By contrast, I propose a model in which an elected chamber sets the legislative agenda and oversees deliberative fairness, while a sortition chamber holds exclusive authority to deliberate and decide policy. This design preserves the communicative and authorization functions of elections, while securing the epistemic advantages of cognitively diverse citizen deliberation. I evaluate this model against three alternatives, pure sortition, co-equal bicameralism, and subordinate sortition bicameralism, along four normative dimensions: resistance to elite capture, representation and inclusion, epistemic quality, and legitimacy and accountability. I argue that only a model that empowers citizens in their "post-learning" capacity, while grounding decisions in a democratically visible and contestable process, can deliver a political system that is both legitimate and epistemically robust.

KEYWORDS: Sortition democracy, Bicameralism, Epistemic democracy, Deliberative democracy, democratic theory

Introduction

Contemporary democratic systems are experiencing crises of legitimacy, responsiveness, and epistemic integrity. Electoral democracy frequently succumbs to elite capture and partisan distortion, undermining both public trust and deliberative quality. Conversely, proposals for replacing elections with randomly selected assemblies (sortition) promise epistemically superior deliberation but raise serious concerns about democratic legitimacy, accountability, and citizen inclusion. This article seeks to achieve a balance between high-quality decision-making while preserving essential democratic values in a way existing proposals have fallen short.

In response to this challenge, I propose a new model of democratic governance. That is, an empowered bicameral system in which elected representatives set the policy agenda, while a randomly selected sortition assembly holds binding legislative authority. Unlike existing bicameral models that give sortition chambers weak or co-equal power alongside elected bodies, my model seeks to institutionalize a functional division of democratic labour. Electoral politics plays its most defensible role when it expresses public priorities, advocates on behalf of organized blocks, and secures symbolic legitimacy, while sortition processes take up the more demanding task of deliberation and judgment. This design takes seriously the epistemic potential of deliberative sortition, while preserving the communicative and legitimating advantages of elections. As I will argue, bicameralism that gives the elected chamber greater or equal policymaking power is still vulnerable to elite capture. On the other hand, pure sortition models are too

insulated from broader public priorities. My model seeks to take advantage of the most promising aspects of both.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, I outline key limitations of electoral democracy, along core evaluative axes. Second, I introduce sortition democracy and examine four institutional pathways, three that exist in the literature, pure sortition, bicameral co-equal chambers, bicameral with a weak sortition chamber, and my own empowered bicameral proposal. Third, I offer a comparative analysis of these models across four axes: resistance to capture, representation and inclusion, epistemic empowerment, and accountability and legitimacy. Ultimately, I argue that only a model that empowers citizens to deliberate in their post-learning capacity, while preserving the agenda-setting and communicative advantages of electoral politics, can effectively balance the core democratic values. This model is grounded in a dual view of legitimacy: input, "government by the people", and output, "government for the people" (Scharpf, 1999). In many cases, theorists assume legitimacy must come exclusively from electoral authorization. However, I argue that elections supply communicative input (citizens shape the agenda and see their advocates monitor the process), while sortition supplies epistemic output (citizens, post-learning, reason under conditions of transparency, cognitive diversity, and fair hearing). With optional referendums as a backstop, citizens retain influence over both agenda and process, even where outcomes do not map onto any party's initial intentions. This dual account answers Lafont's (2023) 'shortcut' worry because in my model the public plays a crucial role by authoring the docket (elections for agenda) and can contest outcomes (referendums), while reason-giving deliberation grounds output legitimacy.

1: The Limits of Electoral Democracy

The democratic case for sortition begins not with utopian speculation but with a diagnosis: electoral democracy, as widely practiced, fails to deliver on many of its own normative ideals. Despite decades of institutional refinement, electoral systems remain highly vulnerable to elite capture, skewed representation, weak public accountability, and poor epistemic performance. While these weaknesses are significant, I also note contexts where elections work best.

1.1 Capture

Electoral systems are often dependent on campaign finance, media exposure, and party infrastructure. Each of these creates avenues for elite manipulation. Politicians rely on wealthy donors and partisan organizations to gain office, and once in office, remain responsive to those actors. Guerrero argues that electoral incentives foster shallow appeals to mass audiences, reliance on heuristics, and symbolic politics (2014, pp. 159–160), rather than independent or reflective judgment. Even defenders of elections, like Rummens and Geenens (2023), acknowledge the influence of interest groups and the tendency of politicians to govern by campaign. In this respect, electoral democracy struggles to preserve the independence and integrity of its decision-makers.

1.2 Representation and Inclusion.

While elections are often equated with sovereignty, they reproduce significant exclusions. As Callenbach and Phillips (2008) and Guerrero (2014, pp. 157–159) note, elected

chambers tend to be dominated by the wealthy and highly educated. Working-class citizens are drastically underrepresented, and racial and gender imbalances persist even in relatively inclusive systems. Moreover, participation is selective. Those with more resources and social capital are more likely to run for office, donate, or engage in party politics. In theory, all citizens have an equal right to run for office. In practice, only a narrow demographic can afford to do so.

1.3 Epistemic Quality.

The epistemic case for electoral democracy, that elections aggregate dispersed knowledge, foster deliberation, and encourage accountability, has come under increasing scrutiny. Achen and Bartels (2017) argue that most citizens lack stable policy preferences and are prone to motivated reasoning (see also: Jerit and Barabas, 2012). Broockman and Kalla (2022) show how partisan identity shapes factual beliefs, and Prior (2005) documents how increased media choice widens political knowledge gaps. Elliott (2023) and Hutton Ferris (2023, pp. 6–7) defend parties as epistemic institutions because they enhance political legibility and mass mobilization, allowing citizens, especially those with fewer resources, to engage with politics through simplified narratives and accessible coalitions. Thus, elections do at least signal but often without robust understanding. At worst however, they amplify misinformation and entrench epistemic injustice.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of epistemic injustice sharpens concerns about the epistemic consequences of electoral democracy. She distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where individuals are unfairly discredited as knowers due to identity prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalized groups lack the conceptual

tools to make sense of their own experiences (Fricker, 2007, pp. 28–29, 130–131). Both forms of injustice are reproduced in electoral systems, where party elites and media filters tend to privilege dominant perspectives and exclude others from public reasoning.

Testimonial injustice plays out when certain groups are seen as less credible, either ignored altogether or treated as less competent political agents. Hermeneutical injustice runs deeper. That is, political institutions and public discourse often fail to recognize marginalized experiences as intelligible or relevant. As Fricker argues, epistemic injustice is a moral wrong that undermines individuals in their capacity as knowers and contributors to collective meaning (Fricker 2007, pp. 1–2). If electoral systems predictably privilege certain social perspectives and disqualify others, they seriously impair epistemic quality in normatively negative ways.

These limitations do not mean that electoral democracy is worthless. Elections remain normatively valuable as public authorship. Indeed, they register broad priorities, create a visible channel for accountability by replacement, and sustain political legibility via parties (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2020; Elliott 2023). In this way, they remain a powerful mechanism for public signaling and the symbolic value of voting should not be dismissed.

1.4 Accountability and Legitimacy.

Electoral democracy relies on periodic voting as its central mechanism of accountability. Yet this mechanism is crude and indirect. Achen and Bartels (2017) argue that citizens often vote on the basis of party identity, emotional affect, or symbolic events such as natural disasters or national scandals, rather than sustained policy evaluation (pp. 137,

219–221). Elections can be seen as providing a signal about the public will, but not necessarily informed oversight. That is, election outcomes are at best, a barometer of public sentiment. Worse, partisan polarization and declining trust can erode the legitimacy of electoral outcomes altogether. It should be admitted that elections maintain at least a thin form of procedural accountability in that members must seek re-election on a regular basis. As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2020, pp. 96–98) argue, parties are not merely pragmatic tools but normative institutions that legitimize political rivalry by framing disagreement as a healthy expression of pluralism rather than a threat to the common good. As Malleson (2023, p. 3) argues elections remain the most viable mechanism for ensuring that citizens see their voices as mattering. Thus, while limited, elections offer a significant legitimizing role.

2: Institutional Sortition Options

The weaknesses of electoral democracy invite the search for alternatives that take the ideal of citizen self-government seriously without romanticizing public capacity or underestimating obstacles. The next section describes four broad approaches to sortition and briefly mentions their main normative justifications. Pure sortition models aim to replace electoral mechanisms entirely, vesting legislative authority directly in randomly selected citizen assemblies. Bicameral models, by contrast, attempt a hybrid solution. That is, they pair an elected chamber with a sortition chamber. Bicameral proposals have been advanced in two main forms, one where each chamber has co-equal power (Gastil and Wright, 2018) and another where the sortition chamber is subordinated to the elected

chamber (Abizadeh, 2021). Finally, I describe my bicameral empowered sortition model that grants the sortition chamber direct policy-making power while retaining an elected agenda-setting body.

2.1 Pure Sortition Proposals

Among the most influential pure sortition models is Alexander Guerrero's lottocracy, which proposes abolishing elections altogether and creating multiple randomly selected citizen legislatures, each dedicated to a single-issue (Guerrero, 2014; 2024). Instead of general-purpose elected representatives, citizens selected by lot would serve fixed terms on domain-specific legislatures. For example, one single issue legislator might be focused on education policy, another on transportation, another on healthcare. Guerrero's central intuition is that specialization allows citizens to acquire sufficient knowledge through expert input, structured deliberation, and focused engagement. Each body would have full legislative authority in its domain, empowered to set its own agenda, hold hearings, and pass binding laws without the mediation of an elected executive or partisan legislature. Guerrero argues that by eliminating campaigns and elections, lottocracy would remove the incentives for elite capture, partisan distortion, and shallow electoral pandering, would allow for more thoughtful and inclusive decision-making (Guerrero, 2014, pp. 159-161).

A related but distinct model comes from Terrill Bouricius, who proposes a multi-body sortition system structured around discrete phases of the policy process (Bouricius, 2013). Rather than concentrating all legislative functions in a single citizen assembly, Bouricius outlines a set of randomly selected bodies, an Agenda Council to identify

problems needing legislative attention, one or more Drafting Councils to formulate proposals, a main Policy Council to deliberate and vote, and Oversight Councils to monitor implementation. Each council would be composed of new citizens selected for short, non-renewable terms. Finally, an earlier and simpler pure sortition proposal comes from Callenbach and Phillips (1985), who envision replacing elected legislatures, such as the U.S. House of Representatives, with a single chamber of randomly selected citizens. Though less elaborate than Guerrero's or Bouricius's models, Callenbach's "Citizen Legislature" relies on similar assumptions. That is, that ordinary citizens, with proper support, can deliberate effectively and that random selection provides a more democratic and incorruptible legislature than partisan elections (Callenbach and Phillips, 1985).

2.2 Existing Bicameral Proposals

While pure sortition models offer a compelling vision of democratic renewal, many theorists argue that a wholesale replacement of electoral structures is neither politically feasible nor institutionally prudent. Bicameral proposals emerge as a pragmatic response to this challenge. Indeed, they seek to preserve the legitimacy, accountability, and political agency associated with elections, while insulating legislative deliberation from the distortions of elite capture and partisan competition. Most models envision two distinct chambers: one elected and one composed of randomly selected citizens (Malleson, 2023; Abizadeh, 2021). Across these proposals, there is significant variation not only in the composition of the chambers but in the scope of their legislative authority.

2.2.1 Co-Equal Bicameralism

Gastil and Wright (2018) offer the most robust defense of co-equal bicameralism, proposing a model where both chambers, elected and sortition-based, share legislative authority. In their vision, a Citizens' Assembly operates alongside an elected legislature, with both bodies empowered to initiate and approve laws. The sortition body deliberates on legislation, draws on expert input, and votes on proposals, while the elected chamber serves as a parallel institutional actor with symmetrical powers (Gastil and Wright, 2018, p. 308). Their design reflects a commitment to full democratic parity between electoral and deliberative institutions, aiming to institutionalize both political agency and epistemic inclusiveness.

2.2.2 Constrained Sortition Bicameralism

By contrast, theorists such as Abizadeh (2021), Malleson (2018; 2023), and Bagg (2024) envision a more limited role for sortition chambers. Abizadeh's proposal retains legislative primacy in the elected chamber while empowering a sortition body to review, amend, and veto legislation, though only on a suspensive basis and excluding fiscal matters (2021, p. 799). The sortition chamber in this model plays an editorial and corrective role rather than an authorial one. Malleson similarly advocates for an advisory model where sortition bodies enhance public trust and reduce elite capture but do not supplant electoral legitimacy or legislative authority (2018, p. 412; 2023).

Bagg is the most cautious epistemically, arguing that ordinary citizens cannot easily meet the cognitive demands of policymaking and are vulnerable to subtle forms of elite

manipulation through facilitation and information framing (2024, pp. 97–102). He proposes that sortition is best used to disrupt elite bias through an oversight body but stops short of granting such bodies formal lawmaking powers. Technically, his model is not strictly a form of bicameralism since his proposed oversight body would function independent of the legislature.

Together, these constrained models reflect a broader theoretical trade-off. Elections are thought to provide legitimacy and accountability, while sortition offers inclusiveness and impartiality. Stone and Plan (2023, p. 213) frame this as a division of democratic labor; Malleson (2018, p. 412) echoes the point by pairing elections with competence and accountability and sortition with diversity and deliberation.

What unites these hybrid proposals is a hesitation to grant sortition bodies primary legislative authority. Even when sortition chambers are valued, their powers are often structured to be supplementary or reactive, rather than generative. The design question, then, is not merely how to combine institutional forms, but whether the epistemic potential of sortition can be realized without meaningful policymaking authority.

2.2.3 A New Bicameral Model

I propose a new bicameral system in which the sortition chamber holds primary legislative authority, with the elected chamber *limited* to agenda-setting and review. This inversion is a deliberate choice that I argue balances core democratic values. It reflects the view that randomly selected citizens, given proper conditions for learning and deliberation, are better positioned to produce high-quality, publicly reasoned decisions than elected

officials embedded in partisan and electoral incentives. My model does not discard electoral institutions entirely, but it reconfigures them to support, rather than dominate the deliberative core of democratic governance.

The process of deliberation I advocate roughly matches Abizadeh's three-stage process: learning, public consultation, and decision-making (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 801). In the learning phase, members would be given briefing materials provided by a non-partisan advisory committee that ensures stakeholders and experts with competing viewpoints are represented (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 802). In the public consultation phase, the sortition assembly could hear from the public. Finally, the sortition assembly would vote and decide on the best legislation based on the above knowledge process.

Previously I argued that political parties struggle to function according to deliberative policymaking principles. However, I will argue that they seem good at being responsive to the public's general sentiments about what direction the nation should be moving toward. For this reason, I would allow political parties to compete over which agenda and oversight process they set for the sortition assembly, and it offers a pathway for non-sortition citizens (through voting for the agenda-setters) to have their say on what issues they want the sortition assembly to prioritize. An advantage of limiting the role of the elected assembly to agenda setting is that it would simplify political parties' messaging to simply stated public concerns (such as housing affordability) rather than actual solutions. Therefore, rather than trying to communicate a complicated policy package, agenda-setting political parties could simply communicate that their priority is, for example, affordable housing. This would help rather than damage the prospects of making politics

more accessible to ordinary citizens. This process would also simplify the learning process for sortition members since they would be tasked with focusing only on narrow agendas rather than having to debate what to prioritize. This functions with analogous benefits to the single-issue legislatures advocated by Guerrero.

Some may prefer petition-driven or sortition-driven agenda setting, e.g., Guerrero's lottocratic agenda mechanisms (2014; 2024) or Bouricius's Agenda Council (2013). These proposals are attractive but weaker on input legitimacy and public legibility. Petitions skew toward organized interests (like corporate interests) and mobilized minorities, risking priority-setting by intensity rather than breadth. These one-off petitions are also not tempered by an interest in re-election. Sortition-based agenda bodies sever the visible line between mass preferences and legislative attention. By contrast, elected agenda-setters aggregate broad priorities at scale, keep a continuous communicative link between voters and what is deliberated, and are publicly answerable for the *selection* and *sequencing* of issues, even though they do not dictate outcomes.

Additionally, elected members would represent interest blocs that would advocate for their preferred policy on behalf of voters alongside expert testimony. Because of their competitive interests, elected politicians and political parties would play an important role as an oversight body. Their roles could include ensuring the process of deliberative learning is sufficiently fair and multi-perspectival. Political parties would be involved in nominating and monitoring competing experts to argue in-front of the sortition assembly as they are going through deliberative learning. In their oversight capacity, members of the elected chamber function as referees/scrutineers, akin to party representatives who

observe and challenge vote counts. Multiple parties are empowered to raise procedural challenges, help ensure balanced expert selection, equal time, and rule-governed facilitation. Their remit is procedural, to contest irregularities and certify compliance with deliberation rules, not to steer conclusions.

Public/expert input and oversight could function according to the below steps monitored by competing partisan slates:

(1) Balanced party-nominated slates: each recognized party may nominate some experts under a minority-party floor, with a one-for-one pairing rule and full disclosure;

(2) Stratified mini-public: a civic-lottery selection of independent experts/practitioners, using possible socio-demographic and viewpoint diversity quotas;

(3) Open portal (anti-astroturf): public submissions with identity attestation, one-submission rule, and funding/conflict disclosures, summarized by independent staff.

This also helps solve the problem of who decides what experts the sortition assembly hears from and how facilitation is conducted. Indeed, the structure is attentive to the risk of the sortition assembly being captured by political parties. This is why it is important for some portion of expert testimony also come from other public advocates as well as accredited non-partisan experts from universities and other interest groups. To reduce expert framing and facilitation bias: (i) expert slates are proposed by multiple parties and civil-society panels, with a transparent balancing rule; (ii) facilitators are appointed by an independent secretariat and confirmed by a supermajority of sortition members; (iii) hearings follow adversarial rules (equal time, cross-examination, disclosure of funding/conflicts); (iv) all sessions are recorded and published with plain-language

summaries; (v) sortition members can summon additional witnesses by supermajority. In this way, with proper rules, political parties can help enhance the richness of the deliberative process in the sortition assembly in a way that preserves the representational advantages of electoral politics.

Moreover, a mechanism of popular referendums (like Switzerland) could function as an additional release valve to check both the agenda and sortition assembly. For example, if the public feels their agenda is not being represented by the elected chamber or if the sortition chamber passes legislation the public strongly disagrees with, a popular initiative could be triggered via the collection of a sufficient number of citizen signatures. To avoid over-use and capture, initiatives would require both (a) a participation quorum (e.g., at least 75% of eligible citizens casting a ballot) and (b) a decision threshold (e.g., an overall majority of eligible voters). This keeps the tool available for salient disputes without letting highly mobilized minorities routinely veto deliberated law.

In the next section, I will offer a more robust normative evaluation of these institutional alternatives. Before moving on, I summarize the main models on a table below.

(Table 1) Models Summarized

Model	Key Proponents	Legislative Power Distribution	Institutional Form
Pure Sortition (Unicameral)	Guerrero, Bouricius, Callenbach & Phillips	All legislative powers held by randomly selected citizens	Single or multiple sortition legislature
Bicameral (Co-equal Chambers)	Gastil & Wright	Elected and sortition chambers have equal power to propose and pass legislation	Balanced bicameralism with dual initiation
Bicameral (Subordinate Sortition)	Abizadeh, Malleson, Bagg	Elected chamber holds primacy; sortition chamber has veto/advisory/oversight	Bicameralism with unequal power, sortition subordinate
Empowered Bicameralism (Sortition empowered)	Me	Elected chamber sets agenda; sortition chamber deliberates and decides policy	Functionally differentiated bicameralism

3: A Comparative Analysis of Sortition Models

To assess the strengths and limitations of competing sortition models, I evaluate each along four normative dimensions: resistance to elite capture, representation and inclusion, epistemic empowerment, and accountability and legitimacy. These criteria reflect fundamental purposes that any democratic institutional design must serve. A democratic system must insulate itself from domination by concentrated power (capture), ensure that all citizens are fairly included and represented (inclusion), enable collective decisions to be informed, reasoned, and responsive to evidence (epistemic empowerment), and provide mechanisms of responsiveness and justification to the broader public (accountability). Together, these four axes capture the key functional

demands that any effective democratic legislature must meet and ends up being grounded in both a form of input and output legitimacy.

Evaluating competing sortition models through this lens makes visible the trade-offs and complementarities between electoral and sortition mechanisms. It also clarifies what is at stake in institutional design: not just who decides, but how decision-making structures shape the quality, equity, and legitimacy of democratic outcomes.

3.1 Capture

I define capture as the undue influence of powerful interests, whether economic, political, or ideological, on democratic decision-making. The central question is whether a democratic body can maintain independence from manipulation by elites or organized interests.

Pure sortition models promise significant resistance to elite capture by bypassing electoral incentives altogether. Guerrero's lottocracy eliminates election campaigns and their associated financial pressures, removing avenues for influence like campaign finance, media control, and partisan loyalty (Guerrero, 2014, p. 164). Similarly, Bouricius's multi-stage model builds in independence by rotating citizens across short-term, non-renewable appointments across different legislative functions. Gastil and Wright also argue that money in politics and the electoral imperative to campaign for re-election create deep dependencies that compromise policy judgment (2018, pp. 305–311). In these models, the promise is straightforward: eliminate the logic of elections, and you eliminate the incentives for elite capture.

Even in more modest proposals, sortition is frequently defended on anti-capture grounds. Bagg, for instance, argues that citizen oversight juries (COJs) would be uniquely capable of resisting manipulation precisely because they are insulated from partisan identity and electoral ambition (2024, pp. 94–101). By empowering sortition bodies to oversee, not design, policy, Bagg hopes to limit their vulnerability to elite influence while preserving their democratic function.

Yet concerns remain. Bagg also warns that the open-ended nature of policymaking makes sortition assemblies vulnerable to subtler forms of manipulation, especially through agenda design, expert framing, or facilitation bias (2024, p. 95). Landa and Pevnick similarly argue that even lottery-selected citizens can be indirectly captured by well-organized groups that shape public opinion or offer post-deliberative incentives (2021, pp. 53–55). In pure sortition models like Guerrero's, which grant legislative autonomy without electoral accountability, there is a risk that deliberative independence can be manipulated in the facilitation process.

Bicameral sortition models, such as those proposed by Gastil and Wright or Malleson, often aim to hedge against this risk by balancing sortition assemblies with elected institutions. However, they risk either replicating the vulnerabilities of electoral democracy or create institutional friction. If the elected chamber dominates, the sortition body risks being reduced to symbolic input, and offers little protection against capture. If the sortition chamber has some blocking or corrective power, then gridlock becomes a real concern. Elected officials may ignore or override recommendations, and the two chambers may lack clear mechanisms for resolving disagreements. In these models, the gains from

sortition are often curtailed by the enduring distortions of electoral logic. The trade-off is clear, reducing capture by elites comes at the cost of diminishing the decision-making power of the most epistemically promising chamber.

My proposal for a more empowered bicameral sortition democracy combines the resistance to capture found in pure sortition with safeguards against its facilitation capture risks. Like pure sortition, the chamber of randomly selected citizens is protected from campaign finance, party networks, and electoral ambition. But unlike pure sortition, its agenda is not left to internal control. Instead, a limited elected chamber provides agenda-setting power. Additionally, the elected chamber offers a check on facilitation capture and expert framing by having multi-party oversight into what experts are chosen to testify as well as ensuring deliberative procedures are followed. While the elected chamber may itself be vulnerable to capture, its influence is structurally constrained and tempered by party competition. Moreover, any risks it poses can be further reduced through transparency requirements, participatory agenda input, and public justifications (such as popular referendums). In short, my model achieves resistance to capture without sacrificing responsiveness or falling into gridlock. It leverages the strengths of sortition while strategically containing the weaknesses of electoral institutions.

3.2 Representation and inclusion

Representation and inclusion concern who gets to participate in democratic decision-making and whose interests are reflected in political outcomes. A system that claims to

treat citizens as equals must offer more than formal rights and reflect the population's social, economic, and demographic diversity.

Pure sortition models, such as Guerrero's lottocracy and Bouricius's multi-body system, directly confront the exclusionary dynamics of elections. Because they select participants at random and rotate them regularly, these models aim to produce descriptively representative assemblies in which ordinary citizens, and not self-selected elites, make decisions. For example, working-class representation in a U.S. sortition chamber could rise to at least 30 percent to as high as 60 percent, depending on how "working class" is measured (Glass, 2025; Brenan, 2024). This demographic resemblance can lead to policies that better reflect public preferences (Guerrero, 2014, pp. 157–159). Because members are ordinary citizens, sortition bodies are often seen as more trustworthy (and thus, representative) than elected officials (Wright, 2018, p. 334; Warren and Gastil, 2015; Pow, van Dijk and Marien, 2020).

Scholars such as Callenbach and Phillips, Guerrero, and Abizadeh argue that sortition realizes the ideal of equal standing more effectively than electoral systems, which systematically exclude those lacking the time, resources, or credentials to run for office (Callenbach et al., 2008; Guerrero, 2014, pp. 157–159; Abizadeh, 2021, p. 796). As Stone puts it, public office is a scarce good that everyone ought to have an equal claim to, so distributing it by lottery is a just solution (Stone, 2016, pp. 342–343). Just as we do not restrict jury duty to legal experts, we should not limit public office to those with the means or desire to campaign. Instead, a lottery reflects the equal civic standing of all citizens and

affirms that everyone holds an equal claim to participate in collective decision-making (Stone, 2016, pp. 347–348; Abizadeh, 2021, p. 797).

Malleson introduces an important epistemic dimension to the question of representation. He distinguishes between the empirical self, the citizen as they are, and the post-learning self, the citizen as they might become through structured deliberation, exposure to diverse perspectives, and expert input (Malleson, 2023, p. 445). Sortition-based assemblies, by creating the conditions for transformation, are uniquely able to represent the post-learning self. Thus, insofar as sortition represents a different aspect of the 'self', it gains representational benefits.

Not all critiques of sortition are misplaced when it comes to representation. Rummens and Geenens, and Elliott, argue that sortition's egalitarian promise is undermined by its exclusionary structure. Most people are never selected, which means that randomly chosen citizens govern while the rest of the population remains passive (Rummens and Geenens, 2023, p. 15; Elliott, 2023, pp. 88, 181). Even Malleson acknowledges that elected representatives, for all their flaws, are more intuitively responsive to a broader public (Malleson, 2018). Practical challenges further complicate sortition's claims to inclusiveness. Lever notes that many view political office as a burden, and that low participation rates in assemblies, especially when they are voluntary and minimally compensated, such as 3 percent in the UK Climate Assembly, call into question their representativeness (2023, pp. 104–106). These concerns cannot be dismissed, and in some respects, bicameral models with a stronger elected component may do more to preserve mass inclusion. My proposal preserves some democratic input through an

elected agenda-setting and oversight chamber, while ensuring that the body responsible for decision-making is descriptively representative and structurally designed to foster Malleson's post-learning self.

Austrup (2024) offers an important articulation of a less often considered issue related to representation. The elite capture which is common in electoral systems tend to overrepresent certain social groups (lawyers who get elected, for example). This can be seen as a form informal 'misrepresentation' that occurs even without bad intentions, as elites may unreflectively legislate according to their own worldview (e.g. the worldview of lawyers) (Rosset and Stecker, 2019; Schakel and Hakhverdian, 2018). My proposal instead embraces Austrup's call for "authorial empowerment" by granting ordinary citizens direct legislative authority that has a better chance of representing non-elite citizens (2024, pp. 7–13).

Finally, it is worth addressing Lever's worry about participation rates mentioned above. That is, what incentive would working-class people have to volunteer to serve in a sortition assembly when they are already struggling to put food on the table. For this reason, it is crucial that my bicameral model offer sortition members similar levels of compensation as currently existing elected legislators to those selected to serve in a sortition assembly (See: Abizadeh, 2021, p. 800). Additional incentives could be included, such as childcare, educational opportunities like a free university education after serving, and the guarantee to be able to return to one's previous job. Indeed, making a sortition assembly function purely on voluntary grounds would produce de facto exclusion for those who do not have the means to take time off from work.

The above features ensures that descriptive representation is not symbolic but substantively linked to policy outcomes. This avoids the risk of arbitrary or opaque agenda capture that haunts pure sortition models, while maintaining broader inclusion through the elected agenda-setting and oversight chamber and mechanisms for popular referendums. Where electoral chambers are prone to reproducing social inequalities, and weak sortition chambers fail to deliver on their transformative promise, my model seeks to align inclusion and representation with judgment. The worthwhileness of this trade-off will become more evident when I discuss the epistemic axis next.

3.3 Epistemic and Deliberative Quality

The third axis is epistemic and deliberative quality which centres on the ability of democratic institutions to support inclusive, well-reasoned decision-making. My core epistemic claim is simple: descriptively representative citizens, given time, balanced information, and rule-governed deliberation, routinely outperform partisan legislatures on cognitive complexity, openness to counter-arguments, and public justification. Cognitive diversity is the mechanism; structured learning is the enabler. A central feature of epistemic empowerment is that it does not stand in tension with democratic ideals like legitimacy, inclusion, or accountability. On the contrary, when ordinary citizens engage in structured deliberation their capacity to justify decisions deepens. This makes sortition assemblies more resistant to elite manipulation (by equipping them to recognize bad reasoning and bias), more representative in a meaningful sense (by giving voice to overlooked or marginalized forms of knowledge), and offering more output legitimacy (by

producing decisions that citizens can see as reasoned, fair, and responsive to evidence). In this way, I argue that epistemic empowerment reinforces the other democratic values I outline.

Landemore (2013) has famously argued that sortition secures broader cognitive diversity than electoral systems, allowing for epistemically richer outcomes. While some have challenged the generalizability of her case, the underlying intuition is powerful. That is, when people from a wide range of backgrounds are selected to deliberate together, they bring different heuristics and forms of practical knowledge, which, when scaffolded through good design, can lead to better judgments. As Benson (2021) argues, sortition "recreates in a smaller deliberative group the cognitive diversity which exists in the wider population" (p. 8272). And that diversity, when supported with structure, guidance, and information, delivers better outcomes. Stone and Plan (2024, p. 209) echo this, noting that sortition avoids the filtering effects of electoral pathways and tends to be more independent of elite interests. Meanwhile, theorists like Vandamme (2021), Wright (2018), and myself (2022) argue that sortition's epistemic benefits make it more likely to confront structural injustices like capital or environmental issues, by insulating policy deliberation from the short-term incentives of electoral cycles and corporate lobbying.

Malleson (2023) offers a helpful framework here with his distinction between the empirical and post-learning self which I mentioned earlier. While the empirical self reflects citizens as they are, uninformed, inconsistent, and shaped by context, the post-learning self represents the citizen as they might become through structured deliberation. Sortition, in his view, uniquely supports this transformation, enabling participants to evolve through

exposure to expert input, reason-giving, and interaction with diverse perspectives (pp. 445, 452–453). This is a result of, as Abizadeh (2021) notes, the way sortition institutionalizes different phases of learning, consultation, and deliberation. It is not just that citizens deliberate, but that the structure itself promotes epistemically legitimate reasoning (Abizadeh, 2021, p. 801).

We can also consider Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice. Fricker (2007) identifies two key forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, where a speaker's credibility is unjustly deflated due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where marginalized groups lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences. Electoral democracy, with its reliance on partisan competition and media performance, tends to amplify dominant voices while marginalizing others. This reproduces testimonial injustice through elite gatekeeping and campaign financing structures. More subtly, it fosters hermeneutical injustice by crowding out alternative perspectives that do not conform to mainstream political framings. In this way, electoral democracy not only distributes political power unequally, but also entrenches epistemic inequality by systematically excluding or distorting marginalized knowledge. In this context, the epistemic landscape of electoral democracy appears far more fragmented and manipulated than its defenders allow, meaning it is not as clear that something necessarily valuable is lost and perhaps much gained by incorporating empowered sortition assemblies. Based on Fricker's account, epistemic injustice may be lessened by incorporating sortition assemblies since they are more likely to be inclusive of

marginalized voices. Still, it is important to consider the empirical case for sortition's epistemic benefits.

A large and growing body of studies shows that when citizens are selected by lot, provided with expert briefings, and given the opportunity to deliberate in a structured environment, their judgments improve along multiple dimensions. They become more open to opposing views, more consistent in their reasoning, and less vulnerable to polarization and bias (See: Niemeyer et al. 2024**)**. One striking example is the 2021 Finnish mini-public on COVID-19 (Leino et al., 2022). Despite the technical complexity and contentiousness of the issue, participants did not defer to the loudest or most recent expert. Instead, they deliberated collectively, weighed competing views, and resisted bias. No dominant narrative emerged; just shared judgment grounded in reasoned exchange. This directly counters the idea that sortition bodies are naive or easily manipulated. Another example from Fishkin et al. (2021) shows that participation in deliberative polling consistently enhances cognitive complexity and reduces ideological rigidity. Their research demonstrates that citizens, when given balanced information and time to reflect, often revise their views in light of better arguments (p. 1466).

An especially striking comparison comes from Suiter et al. (2022), who analyzed deliberative quality around Ireland's constitutional amendment to repeal the abortion ban. The process involved both a parliamentary committee and a citizens' assembly composed of 99 randomly selected members. While both heard expert presentations, only the citizens' assembly engaged in structured Q&A and facilitated discussions (Suiter et al., pp. 635-636). Drawing on deliberative democratic theory, the authors focused on *cognitive*

complexity – the capacity to engage multiple perspectives and tolerate ambiguity (Suiter et al., p. 634). They found that the citizens' assembly was more open to uncertainty, more integrative of opposing views, and generally more deliberative (Suiter et al., p. 640). In contrast, the parliamentary committee, shaped by partisan dynamics, was more adversarial and less open (Suiter et al., p. 641). The findings offer compelling evidence that non-partisan, structured environments better support the epistemic aims of deliberation, even on deeply polarizing issues.

Nevertheless, many critics worry that sidelining elections risks cutting off vital epistemic functions. Rummens and Geenens (2023) argue that without parties and campaigns, there's no feedback loop between the public and decision-makers. Hutton Ferris (2023) warns that without this, citizens lose "political legibility" – they no longer understand how or why decisions are made. For Urbinati (2020) and Cordier (2021), sortition bypasses the real conflicts political parties channel, making it feel anti-political. Muirhead and Rosenblum (2020), along with Elliott (2023), stress that parties help people make sense of politics and lower the cognitive costs of participation. Elliott goes further, arguing that the epistemic ecosystem created by elections and parties, one that helps ordinary citizens grasp complex issues, would be dismantled if sortition replaced electoral democracy entirely (Elliott, 2023, p. 194; see also: Landa and Pevnick, 2021). These are valid concerns that my proposal incorporates which I discuss below.

Pure sortition models such as Guerrero's lottocracy and Bouricius's multi-stage system are right to prioritize epistemic empowerment. These designs eliminate partisan incentives, provide ample time for structured deliberation, and support the transformation

of citizens into their "post-learning" selves (Malleson, 2023, pp. 445, 452). Because they centre diverse, non-elite perspectives and enabling deliberation free from electoral distortion, these models make good on the promise of inclusive public reasoning (Landemore, 2013; Benson, 2021). However, their epistemic insulation can come at a cost. Without formal integration into broader political systems or mechanisms to surface public priorities, these designs risk becoming epistemically inward, competent at problem-solving, but potentially disconnected from evolving public concerns and risking a kind of arbitrary agenda-setting and eliminate the broad public feedback elections provide.

Conversely, bicameral models that give sortition chambers only advisory or equal power often dilute the very epistemic potential they aim to harness. When elected chambers retain co-equal or veto power, they reintroduce the partisan distortions, elite pressures, and short-term incentives that sortition was meant to correct (Landa and Pevnick, 2021; Malleson, 2018). This results in gridlock or in a situation where the knowledge cultivated in the sortition body remains politically inert. Malleson argues that the empirical self must be represented, citizens as they are before learning matter. I agree, but only at the agenda-setting stage. In my view, citizens' needs and priorities should shape the questions democracy asks. But the process of answering those questions, the authorial work, should be governed by the post-learning self.

My bicameral model aims to balance these concerns. Indeed, it grants agenda-setting and oversight powers to the elected chamber, while reserving final legislative authority for a sortition chamber. This structure affirms the epistemic value of elections, not as decision-making mechanisms, but as tools for expressing public priorities. Some

may wonder why I advocate for keeping elections at all given their epistemic weaknesses. Electoral democracy, despite its many flaws, channels a form of situated knowledge. That is, it reveals what matters most to people and enables mass coordination around broad social goals. Opinion polls and campaign discourse already perform this agenda-setting function by highlighting which issues dominate public concern, whether housing, healthcare, or climate change.

Although elections have epistemic flaws, these limitations clarify why their role is best suited to taking the public's pulse rather than deciding policy. Even when surveying some of the most damning findings about electoral democracy, the flipside justifies its value. Research shows that voter behavior is shaped less by informed policy preferences than by partisan identity, social cues, and emotional allegiances (Achen & Bartels, 2017, pp. 9–10, 219–221). Electoral judgments are also prone to distortion, from punishing incumbents for uncontrollable events (p. 137) to being swayed by partisan media and misinformation (Broockman & Kalla, 2022; Prior, 2007; PRRI, 2024). These patterns, bias, polarization, and even conspiracy beliefs, limit elections' capacity for careful policymaking. Yet they also reveal something meaningful. That is, they register which issues and grievances are most salient to the public, even if expressed through distorted perceptions. For this reason, elections remain valuable for agenda control, signaling what concerns citizens most, while the careful, informed judgment needed for policy is better achieved through deliberative sortition.

Complex policy decisions demand the kind of inclusive, reflective, and structured deliberation that sortition chambers are uniquely equipped to provide. In this respect, my

proposal embodies Fricker's (2007) vision of epistemic justice: not only ensuring that marginalized voices are heard, but that they are embedded in epistemic structures capable of recognizing their contributions as knowledge. Because this model integrates the clarity of electoral signaling with the depth of deliberative reasoning, it avoids the epistemic pitfalls of both electoral dominance and insulated mini-publics. It offers a synthesis, one that treats epistemic empowerment as a central, organizing value of democratic design.

3.4 Accountability and legitimacy

I define legitimacy and accountability as the conditions under which governing authority is both democratically justified and subject to meaningful public control. Following Scharpf's distinction, legitimacy has two complementary dimensions: input legitimacy, grounded in "government by the people," and output legitimacy, grounded in "government for the people" (Scharpf, 1999). Input legitimacy depends on whether institutions are responsive, transparent, and accountable, ensuring that citizens can influence and hold decision-makers responsible (Scharpf, 1999: 7). Output legitimacy depends on whether decisions effectively promote the public good and meet shared problem-solving needs (Scharpf, 1999: 12). Accountability ties these dimensions together by ensuring that decision-makers remain answerable for both their procedures and their outcomes. This dual framework captures both aspects of what makes a broader democratic system appealing and provides the standard against which these models will be evaluated: whether it empowers

citizens to shape political decisions and agendas while also producing policies that are substantively justified.

Despite sortition's descriptive representation strengths, critics worry about its broader democratic legitimacy and accountability. Based on the idea that deliberative sortition bodies may operate in isolation without the broader public input and adversarial dynamics that stimulate debate in electoral systems, some worry that this threatens legitimacy (Rummens and Geenens, 2023, p. 13). In contrast, elections provide regular opportunities for citizens to exert influence through votes (Rummens and Geenens, 2023, pp. 15–16). Hutton Ferris worries that some sortition systems leave the question of who is responsible for setting the agenda to unaccountable randomly selected members. Without a political party policy agenda, the other option in a pure sortition system would be to hand over agenda-setting control to the bureaucrats (Hutton Ferris, 2023, p. 10). But this seems to threaten input legitimacy. In this way, sortition risks creating a "black box" effect, where decisions are made by a small, isolated group (either bureaucrats or unaccountable randomly selected citizens), disconnected from the public sphere. This lack of visibility and accountability undermines citizens' ability to identify with the decision-making process, leading to disenfranchisement and disillusionment (Rummens and Geenens, 2023, p. 17).

Landa and Pevnick emphasize that unlike elected representatives, sortition members are not accountable to voters, which can erode incentives to serve the public interest (2021, p. 50). This aligns with Lafont's worry that relying on a randomly selected sortition assembly to make decisions implies that the rest of the unselected population

must submit to “blind deference” (Lafont, 2019). Since randomly chosen members in a sortition assembly can change their minds based on new evidence, evidence those in the public may not see, we have no reason to think that their opinions reflect the actual views of the rest of the population (Lafont, 2019, p. 79). Instead, critics argue democracy requires “equal and effective opportunities of participation in shaping political decisions to all citizens” (Lafont, 2019, p. 27). Lafont’s complaint against sortition is that it constitutes a “shortcut” because it bypasses the influence of citizens and means that those not selected in the sortition chamber will need to blindly defer (Lafont, 2019, p. 128). Moreover, without electoral pressure, sortition members may lack a strong sense of responsibility to the public (Landa and Pevnick, 2021, p. 61).

Bicameral designs that weaken or equalize the power of sortition chambers can offer modest improvements. Models where a sortition chamber advises or reviews legislation shaped by elected officials avoid concerns about democratic detachment. Consistent with Guerrero’s view that elections are often a crude and indirect means of control, dominated by name recognition and partisan branding, sortition augmentation can improve this (Guerrero, 2014). The electoral chamber can help legitimize outcomes while the sortition chamber lends deliberative depth. Yet when the chambers hold equal power or veto authority, decision-making can stall, and the epistemic advantages of sortition can be neutralized through partisan gridlock. Moreover, if the sortition body is only advisory, its impact is symbolic rather than substantive, undermining its claim to output legitimacy making it hard to justify the risks of reduced electoral control.

This is where my empowered bicameral proposal offers a more compelling balance. It preserves an electoral chamber, not to reinforce electoral primacy, but to maintain a visible and communicative channel of input legitimacy. By giving the elected body control over agenda-setting, the model safeguards responsiveness to public priorities. This mirrors existing democratic intuitions, citizens often know which issues matter most even if they disagree on solutions. Retaining elections for agenda control preserves that signaling function and ensures democratic input, without handing over final authority to an epistemically compromised process. At the same time, placing decision-making authority in the hands of a well-designed sortition chamber protects against elite capture, empowers citizens in their post-learning capacity, and helps secure output legitimacy. The elected chamber secures additional input legitimacy by offering institutional oversight, monitoring the transparency and balance of the sortition process without obstructing its autonomy. Moreover, the additional protection offered by a popular referendum adds a layer of accountability to the democratic system. Crucially, the legitimacy of outcomes does not hinge on matching any party's initial intentions. It rests on a continuous chain that citizens can track: public advocacy authorizes the agenda; multi-party refereeing assures procedural fairness; transparent deliberation produces reason-giving outcomes; and referendums supply a final avenue of public contestation where needed.

Many criticisms of sortition based on legitimacy assume that it must derive exclusively from direct popular choice. However, this view conflates authorization with justification. On my dual account, the epistemic quality of decision-making contributes to output legitimacy, but in a way that avoids the technocratic "shortcuts" Lafont (2019;

Lafont & Urbinati 2025) warns against. In my model, the sortition chamber does not operate in isolation from the public. Rather, its deliberations are anchored in input legitimacy through agenda-setting and oversight elections, popular referendums, and transparent procedures that keep its work accountable across the democratic system. This ensures that its epistemic advantages, careful deliberation, diverse representation, and freedom from electoral incentives, are deployed in response to public-defined priorities. In this way, the sortition chamber's authority is not derived from bypassing citizens because elections give direction, sortition exercises judgment, and both together preserve democratic authorship of law while improving the quality of decisions.

I concede that my model entails a real cost to input legitimacy. Indeed, the broader public does not continuously author policy; their control is largely indirect (agenda-setting elections and partisan oversight) and exceptional (triggered referendums). On a dual view of legitimacy, however, this thinner authorization is proportionate and justified by output-legitimacy gains (Scharpf 1999). Election-driven lawmaking is systematically vulnerable to bias, polarization, and noisy accountability (Achen & Bartels 2017), whereas structured sortition deliberation has been shown to produce more cognitively complex, inclusive, and publicly justifiable decisions (Fishkin et al. 2021; Suiter et al. 2022; Leino et al. 2022). This model therefore trades some input legitimacy for markedly better outcomes, an exchange that, on balance, better serves democratic self-government even while taking Lafont's concerns about "shortcuts" seriously.

Below I summarize my analysis in a comparative table.

(Table 2) Models Compared

Model	Resistance to Capture	Representation and Inclusion	Accountability and Legitimacy	Epistemic Empowerment
Pure Sortition (Unicameral)	Strong (no elections or parties)	Moderate: Strong descriptively; weak inclusively	Weak (no public authorization or recall)	Strong (deliberative depth and diversity)
Bicameral (Co-equal Chambers)	Moderate (electoral chamber remains vulnerable)	Strong (sortition adds descriptiveness, and inclusive)	Strong (electoral input and epistemic output legitimacy combined)	Moderate (deliberation shared, but diluted)
Bicameral (Subordinate Sortition)	Moderate to weak (electoral chamber dominates)	Moderate (sortition underpowered, but electoral inclusion preserved)	Stronger input legitimacy, but limited output benefits	Weak to moderate (limited empowerment of sortition chamber)
Empowered Bicameralism	Strong (non-partisan chamber insulated; electoral power limited)	Strong (empirical and post-learning selves both represented, plus descriptive representation)	Strong (electoral chamber maintains public link through inputs; sortition's strong role justified by outputs)	Strongest (maximizes deliberation, diversity, and learning, preserves electoral epistemic landscape)

4. Conclusion: Toward an Empowered Bicameral Sortition Democracy

This article has argued that an empowered bicameral sortition model can simultaneously satisfy the core demands of democratic legitimacy, inclusion, resistance to capture, and epistemic empowerment. Compared to both pure sortition and more conventional bicameral proposals, my model strikes a unique and defensible balance. It draws on electoral institutions to articulate public priorities and channel political legitimacy, while empowering sortition assemblies to deliberate and decide from a position of epistemic

strength. This division of labor does not arbitrarily limit either chamber's value but aligns their institutional design with their respective advantages. Elected representatives can frame urgent agendas, reflect mass preferences in broad strokes, and ensure the deliberative procedures in the sortition chamber are fair. On the other hand, sortition-based citizens' assemblies can do the careful, inclusive, and cognitively diverse work of judgment. The result is a democratic system that is more resilient to elite capture, more representative in both descriptive and cognitive terms, and more capable of generating reasoned public decisions that citizens can recognize as fair and legitimate, while not disenfranchising the broader public. Taken as a whole, across the axes of capture, representation, epistemic empowerment, and accountability and legitimacy my proposal offers the most balanced approach that seeks to channel the most appealing aspects of elections and sortition where best suited.

That said, this is an ambitious institutional vision, and several important design questions remain. One is how to handle concurrent or fast-moving agendas. Guerrero (2024) proposes issue-specific legislatures to address this, and my model is open to similar flexibility. Multiple sortition chambers could be convened in parallel, or the main chamber could be divided into committees that report back to the whole. Likewise, the elected agenda-setting chamber could play a coordinating role, determining issue priority and ensuring equitable distribution of deliberative capacity. Oversight mechanisms also need careful attention. While I do not favor granting the elected chamber veto power or the ability to remove sortition members, its internal party competition puts it in a strong

position to monitor deliberative quality, ensuring adequate inclusion of diverse partisan perspectives, and referring issues to judicial review when appropriate.

Relatedly, the role of the executive and public administration is worth addressing. My model leaves this question open, but one plausible option is to elect the executive directly from among the members of the elected agenda-setting chamber. This would tie administrative leadership to the public-facing, representative arm of the system without over-empowering electoral dynamics. Similarly, the head of the civil service or public administration might be nominated by this body but subject to confirmation by the sortition chamber. These arrangements would ensure coherence between agenda-setting and implementation and enhance the input legitimacy offered by the elected chamber.

In short, realizing this model requires a spirit of institutional experimentation and democratic reformism. No proposal of this scale can succeed without iterative design, careful evaluation, and political imagination. But that is not a flaw unique to this model, it is the shared condition of all meaningful democratic innovation. If we are serious about building institutions that are both legitimate and epistemically capable, we should move beyond the binaries of technocracy and populism, electoralism and sortition, and embrace a more integrated approach. The case for empowered sortition is not utopian, it is grounded in a growing body of empirical evidence and philosophical insight. Indeed, unlike many defenses of electoral democracy, which often rely on idealized assumptions about citizen behavior, such as Elliott's notion of the "minimum citizen" requirement, my model only demands transformation from those selected to serve. And here, the empirical record is strong: participants in sortition assemblies do become more reflective, informed, and

inclusive in their reasoning. The broader public need not undergo a normative shift for the system to function effectively. Of course, we might hope that these assemblies positively influence public discourse over time, but that is an aspiration, not a precondition. In this sense, the model is epistemically ambitious yet modest.

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