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Counteracting Populist Anti-Immigrant Sentiments: Is Government's Action Legitimate?

Abstract: Right-wing populist parties often resort to a xenophobic rhetoric which both exploits and fuels existing illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments. Since populist anti-immigrant sentiments are at odds with fundamental liberal values and challenge the implementation of any liberal ethics of migration, this essay argues that states should adopt civic education policies to counter such sentiments and persuade citizens to develop liberal attitudes towards immigrants. Empirical evidence suggests that sentiments may be malleable, and there are already examples of local governments devising or supporting initiatives aimed at dispelling prejudices and promoting positive interactions. It might be objected that a government's involvement in shaping sentiments and opinions conflicts with liberal democratic states' commitment to individual autonomy and electoral fairness. However, I argue that civic education policies are not necessarily incompatible with such values and I provide five criteria to identify policies that liberal democratic governments may legitimately adopt to counteract anti-immigrant sentiments.

Keywords: anti-immigrant sentiments; populism; civic education; liberalism; democracy.

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Introduction

A troubling feature of contemporary right-wing populism is the use of a xenophobic rhetoric that both exploits and fuels prejudice, racism and illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments among citizens. Populist anti-immigrant sentiments have normatively relevant primary and secondary effects. First, not only their spread constrains the implementation of inclusive immigration policies, but it also provides popular support to illiberal immigration policies and social practices. As a secondary, long-term effect, widespread anti-immigrant sentiments reduce social cohesion and threaten the state's basic liberal values, thereby undermining support for distributive justice and the stability of liberal democratic institutions. Thus, they represent a challenge for any liberal theory of justice in migration, not just for strong cosmopolitan ones (as I explain in section 1). The main goal of the paper is to argue that liberal governments should intervene on public opinion to oppose the diffusion of populist anti-immigrant sentiments and convey alternative inclusive narratives. First, I consider whether governments are capable of having any influence on citizens' anti-immigrant sentiments. Therefore, section 2 provides empirical evidence suggesting that citizens' attitudes towards migrants are susceptible to change

and offers examples of policies (and local-level initiatives involving public intervention) aimed at promoting inclusive attitudes towards newcomers and at reducing hostile ones. I present such measures as examples of civic education policies that governments may use to counteract illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments. The core of the paper is then devoted to considering whether such civic education policies are compatible with liberal democratic values and whether they should be adopted by liberal democratic governments. Section 3 presents two well-founded worries connected with a state's intervention in shaping public opinion, focussing on the liberal value of individual autonomy and on the democratic principle of fairness in electoral competition. This leads to an apparent dilemma: although populist anti-immigrant sentiments should be counteracted on the basis of liberal democratic values, liberal democratic values seem to exclude the permissibility of civic education policies to reduce such sentiments among adult citizens. However, section 4 provides five normative criteria which set limits both to the contents and to the means that liberal democratic governments can legitimately pursue to counteract anti-immigrant sentiments, showing that civic education policies can be compatible with both individual autonomy and electoral fairness.

What is troubling about populist anti-immigrant sentiments?

Social scientists and normative theorists are devoting increasing attention to the rise of populist parties in western liberal democracies. Many of them express concern about the current populist success: either depicted as a temporary illiberal regression or as a degeneration marking the end of liberal democratic politics, populism has typically a pejorative connotation. However, it is not always clear which features of contemporary populism make it so worrisome. Although populist parties and movements are sometimes difficult to locate on the right-and-left axis, it seems that scholars are particularly preoccupied with those of the right-wing, which currently have the greater popular support and electoral success in most European countries. This empirical fact might be sufficient to explain why most literature deals with right-wing populism rather than with left-wing populism. However, there seems to be a normative reason too: right-wing populism appears as morally problematic both for its populist and for its nationalist and exclusionary right-wing ideological features. While a few theorists defend left-wing populism (Mouffe, 2018), right-wing populism seems to receive almost universal moral condemnation among scholars. Therefore, it is important to identify what is specifically troubling about right-wing populism.

    Anti-elitism is a feature common to all populist movements. However, another kind of antagonism marks those of the right-wing: namely, the antagonism

between the homogeneous native people and the aliens (Mudde, 2007). Far from being incompatible, the vertical antagonism between the people and the elite and the horizontal antagonism between the native and the aliens reinforce one another: the establishment is believed to be plotting against the people, protecting immigrants more than their own citizens. What is particularly troubling about right-wing populism is thus a combination of populist and nativist ideology which results in a xenophobic rhetoric that both exploits and fuels anti-immigrant sentiments among citizens.

In this paper, the expression 'populist anti-immigrant sentiments' refers to a diverse set of beliefs and emotions that are both widespread among citizens (particularly among supporters of right-wing populism) and voiced in the rhetoric of populist right-wing parties. The term 'sentiments' denotes that what is at stake are hostile, discriminatory attitudes, instead of behaviours (though such sentiments may well give rise to individual and collective actions, including policies). Attitudes are mental dispositions having both a cognitive and an emotional component: anti-immigrant ones thus include both negative beliefs and negative feelings about immigrants. Furthermore, the term 'sentiments' underlines that such beliefs and emotions do not constitute a comprehensive moral doctrine: we are talking of scattered, often incoherent opinions and emotive reactions, rather than full-fledged world views (Badano and Nuti, 2017: 4-5). In line with populist thin-centred ideology (Mudde, 2004), the anti-immigrant sentiments expressed in populist right-wing rhetoric proved to resonate both with the views of radical-right supporters and with those of moderate conservatives and even left-wing parties' former supporters. Finally, the term 'sentiments' conveys the idea that emotions play a key role: populist anti-immigrant rhetoric is highly emotive, just as the attitudes of those citizens who are susceptible to such a rhetoric. Such psychological factors mediate among micro and macro factors (demographic variables and structural conditions) on the one side, and the success of right-wing populism on the other (Samela and Von Scheve, 2017).

Fear and anger are the most cited emotions in literature, though shame has also been said to be involved in anti-immigrant sentiments.[1] Often, social scientists refer to citizens' anxiety and threat perception, which are sustained and fuelled by the depiction of migrants as economic and cultural threats in populist right-wing rhetoric. Indeed, right-wing populism not only echoes but also rationalises fears by suggesting that threats are real and proximate. Right-wing populist politicians may use examples (including fake ones) to sustain their

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[1]   All three seem to revolve around the actual or anticipated loss of (or the failure to display) a good (or a characteristic) that is highly valued or perceived as constitutive of one's sense of identity. Among philosophical works on such emotions, see Kauppinen (2018); Nussbaum (2013).

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predictions, exploiting fallacious arguments and conversational implicatures, or allude to unfalsifiable conspiracy theories: thus, they not only legitimise emotive reactions among their supporters but also seem to provide some foundations to their opinions (Krzyżanowski, 2020).[2] Some studies suggest that those susceptible to populist right-wing rhetoric, who already have anxious attitudes towards migrants, become more anxious and particularly angrier as a result of such a rhetoric. According to Samela and Von Scheve (2017, 2018), repressed shame is the key emotion turning populist right-wing supporters' feelings of insecurity, powerlessness and fear into anger, which is then directed towards migrants. They point in particular to the anticipatory shame (or shame anxiety) for some anticipated material or symbolic losses for which such citizens blame themselves. This might concern economic losses, but also losses in social status and power, as well as failures to preserve some cultural tradition.[3] In Samela and Von Scheve's theory, right-wing populist rhetoric is precisely crafted to contribute to repress shame and to divert it towards newcomers and minorities. Furthermore, citizens may also feel envy towards immigrants (particularly refugees) whose claims and needs are deemed to have been given excessive concern in mainstream parties and media, and who are thought to receive undeserved material and symbolic benefits.[4] Nonetheless, migrants may also elicit disgust for their alleged cultural backwardness and lower economic status (frequently associated with unregulated sexual impulses, dirt and diseases). Indeed, disgust is also often expressed in populist right-wing rhetoric (Bergmann, 2018: 173). In sum, populist right-wing rhetoric fuels, spreads and normalises hostile opinions and hostile emotive reactions towards immigrants, so that anti-immigrant sentiments, including blatant racism, progressively appear morally acceptable and even common-sense (Krzyżanowski, 2020: 505).

The spread of such sentiments, I argue, is morally problematic for any liberal ethics of immigration, because it hinders the implementation of any immigration and integration policy consistent with basic liberal values of freedom and equality and legitimises the adoption of discriminatory policies and social practices that deny the equal moral worth of immigrants and members of minorities of immigrant origin. Liberal theorists disagree on what justice in migration requires in principle, as well as on how states should act under current non-ideal conditions. Cosmopolitan thinkers' interpretations of freedom and equality lead them to claim that justice in migration requires open borders

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2   On conspiracy theories in right-wing populist rhetoric, see Bergmann (2018).

3   Psychological studies suggest that those who hold populist anti-immigrant sentiments feel that they are not enough in control of their social and economic situation, nor is their state (Harrell et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, the UK 'Leave' campaign included both anti-immigrant rhetoric and appeals to 'take back control.'

4   Immigrants scapegoating drives attention on the envied rather than on the object of envy. For a taxonomy of envy, see Protasi (2016).

and freedom to migrate (see Carens, 2013; Cole, 2000; Oberman, 2016), while proponents of liberal nationalist or 'weak cosmopolitan' ethics of immigration defend a qualified right to exclude (see Miller, 2016; Song, 2019). Populist anti-immigrant sentiments, however, are neither compatible with the former nor with the latter. Not only they are obviously at odds with cosmopolitan ethics of migration, but also with liberal nationalist ones. Indeed, the latter are still committed to basic liberal values of freedom and equality (though interpreted in a less extensive way compared to cosmopolitans), which constrain receiving states' right to exclude and protect the free and equal status of those who have been admitted.[5]

By contrast, populist anti-immigrant sentiments exceed what is admissible as reasonable disagreement among people who share basic liberal values of freedom and equality. Anti-immigrant sentiments, as I defined them, are attitudes, which is to say mental dispositions to act based on beliefs and emotions. As psychologists have long observed, attitudes do not directly translate into behaviour. However, they do have an impact on behaviour. Populist anti-immigrant sentiments influence policy preference, providing popular support for immigration and integration policies that are incompatible with any liberal interpretation of basic values of freedom and equality. Moreover, they impact on social practices, providing social legitimacy to everyday discriminatory and racist behaviour, and providing a fertile ground for violent actions in the most extreme cases. In addition to such primary effects affecting admission claimants and those immigrants who already settled, such sentiments have secondary, long-term effects. They reduce mutual trust and cohesion between the native majority and immigrant minorities, thereby undermining support for distributive justice.[6] Furthermore, by eroding the commitment to basic liberal values, populist anti-immigrant sentiments undermine the stability of liberal institutions. A satisfactory analysis of the primary and secondary effects of anti-immigrant sentiments would be worth a separate article. In the remainder of this section, I will only illustrate how such sentiments impact on immigration and citizenship policies, via support for right-wing populist parties.

Concerning admission policies, populist right-wing parties and their supporters may claim the right to seal the borders to all undesired foreigners, including asylum seekers. They may justify the use of coercive means, such as building walls or fences and forcibly returning undocumented migrants or detaining asylum seekers in remote areas, possibly extraterritorially, while processing their requests. They may refuse to participate in resettlement schemes

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5   For example, Miller's theory is committed to non-discrimination and basic human rights (see Miller, 2016).
6   Social cohesion and mutual trust are valued also by liberal nationalists such as Miller (2016).

for refugees. They may also invoke admission bans based on discriminatory and arbitrary grounds, such as nationality, religion or ethnicity.[7] They may use a criminalising and dehumanising language to discredit 'illegals,' 'bogus asylum seekers' and portray them as criminals or invaders. They may justify the exclusion of newcomers on the basis of their supposedly inferior culture and incapacity to integrate in the host society. This becomes evident when it comes to integration and citizenship debates. Indeed, not only the anti-immigrant sentiments voiced by populist parties and shared by a considerable part of public opinion in Europe and the US involve hostility to incoming immigrants, but also discriminatory and distrustful attitudes towards society members of immigrant origins.

Those holding populist anti-immigrant sentiments may not consider long-term immigrant residents (especially those belonging to stigmatised Muslim or Romani minorities) as equal members of society, even when those immigrants acquire citizenship. Since they do not recognise members of minority groups as equals, they may also refuse them fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of worship.[8] They may deny them access to welfare provisions, such as social housing, since only full members of society are thought to be entitled to such provisions. Naturalisation may only provide a second-class citizenship, compared with citizenship acquired at birth. Unsurprisingly, some right-wing populist politicians claim that citizenship that can be revoked to immigrants, for instance when they commit serious crimes.[9] Denationalisation and deportation are powerful instruments to mark the internal boundaries between those who fundamentally belong to the nation and those who can be expelled (Anderson et al., 2011; Gibney, 2019). For populist right-wing nativists, full membership is restricted to native-born citizens who do not have a foreign background. Even so-called 'second-generation immigrants,' who never migrated and were born in the country their parents settled in, may not be considered as full members of the nation. Minorities of immigrant origins are viewed, at best, with suspicion by those who share populist anti-immigrant sentiments, and suspicion frequently turns into open hostility, when generalised prejudice makes each member of an unequal-citizen-group a potential internal enemy.

In short, populist anti-immigrant sentiments are politically relevant and morally troublesome from the standpoint of any liberal ethics of immigration.

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7   Along with the well-known 'Muslim travel ban' introduced by Trump in the US, similar restrictions have been invoked by European populist leaders like the Dutch Geert Wilders (Tait, 2017).

8   Populist rhetoric often fuels islamophobia. Some populist leaders, including Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Matteo Salvini in Italy, claimed that Islam is not compatible with public culture. Wilder also invoked the closure of mosques and the ban of the Quran (Mortimer, 2016).

9   For instance, a recent Italian populist-led government introduced a norm (art. 14) allowing the revoking of Italian citizenship for anyone who acquired it after the age of 18, if condemned for crimes related to terrorism (see Italian Republic, 2018).

Indeed, they hinder the implementation of all liberal immigration policies and foster popular support for policies and practices that are at odds with the basic liberal values of freedom and equality, by discriminating nationals (and residents) of immigrant origins and by violating minimal moral obligations towards non-nationals seeking admission. In addition to such primary effects, they have long-term secondary effects, since they progressively weaken the liberal basis of the state. Therefore, the implications of widespread populist anti-immigrant sentiments even go beyond justice in migration, affecting social and global justice more broadly.

Is it possible to counteract populist anti-immigrant sentiments?

Should a liberal democratic government persuade citizens to develop liberal sentiments towards immigrants, instead of those illiberal ones which are fuelled by populist rhetoric? It is important to consider the empirical and the normative side of this issue separately. In this section, I consider whether it is in practice possible to modify a person's sentiments on immigrants and, more specifically, whether governmental actors can devise effective public policies to counteract populist anti-immigrant sentiments. Section 3 will then ask, assuming that counteracting anti-immigrant sentiments is possible in practice, whether liberal democratic governments should abstain from interfering with citizens' views.

Normative political theorists typically adopt either an idealistic approach that abstracts from receiving societies' attitudes towards immigrants or make only passing references to contemporary right-wing populism and widespread hostility towards immigrants. Moreover, those who acknowledge the existence of anti-immigrant sentiments tend to take them as given: the normative issues that political theorists examine concern what states should do to integrate immigrants in such a hostile environment or whether restrictive immigration policies should be preferred to inclusive ones to avoid racist backlash reactions. Little attention is paid to how anti-immigrant sentiments are formed, what can fuel and spread them or, on the contrary, decrease and contain them.[10]

However, citizens' sentiments towards migrants are in fact malleable: social psychology shows that changing citizens' attitudes towards immigrants is possible (though not easy). A large body of literature shows that intergroup relations generally improve as a result of positive contact (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) and there is evidence illustrating that interaction also affects citizens' attitudes towards immigrants and immigration policy preference.

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10   A recent exception is Hidalgo (2019) who considers the individuals' ethics of immigration and thus briefly discusses what triggers anti-immigrant sentiments, whether they might be susceptible to change and explicitly calls for open-border activists' advocacy in changing public opinion's attitudes.

Positive contact generally reduces intergroup prejudice: repeated and intimate interactions, such as friendships, are particularly effective; however, even episodic positive contact with immigrants can reduce threat perception and hostility towards them.[11] By providing direct knowledge which may contradict prejudice, intergroup contact promotes the cognitive revision of hostile beliefs. However, experimental evidence shows that its efficacy is primarily due to the lowering of negative emotions, including fear and anger, and the promotion of positive ones, such as sympathy, pride or trust (Miller et al., 2004). Although casual contacts are not necessarily positive, and negative contacts may fuel hostile attitudes, evidence suggests that previous positive interactions can reduce the impact of future negative ones (Paolini et al., 2014). Hence, the literature in social psychology shows that 'promoting opportunities for positive contact, and hindering the potential for negative contact, both appear implementable strategies to improve relations between receiving society members and new immigrants' (Kotzur et al., 2018: 824).

Besides being strongly affected by direct contact (i.e. face to face interaction), what a person thinks of a member of an outgroup is also mediated by the interaction with other members of the ingroup: hearsay, written or visual sources of information also shape a person's sentiments towards immigrants. A growing body of literature in social psychology shows that not only direct but also indirect positive contact can reduce intergroup hostility (Vezzali et al., 2014). Concerning sentiments towards immigrants, experimental evidence supports the efficacy of vicarious contact, a form of indirect contact in which participants observe a fictional setting (e.g. a novel or a movie) where ingroup-member characters interact with outgroup-member characters. Vicarious contact proved to have an influence on people's attitudes even in highly segregated or conflictual areas where direct interaction is unusual or risky and thus may facilitate future direct interaction. Storytelling, as a form of vicarious contact, can thus contribute to reducing anti-immigrant sentiments.

Contact theory can therefore offer useful insights for policymaking, and a few cases suggest that some state and non-state actors already rely on it. Non-governmental organisations often promote communication campaigns and direct interaction with immigrants to counter the spreading of anti-immigrant sentiments. What is more, governmental actors also cooperate with non-governmental ones to support their initiatives or devise policies to reduce intergroup hostility and improve mutual attitudes among citizens and

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11 Experimental evidence shows that intimate contact in the form of friendship can reduce willingness to expel immigrants (McLaren, 2003). Furthermore, a recent study concluded that also casual positive contact reduces the likelihood of perceiving stigmatised immigrants as threats and reduces preferences for right-wing populism (Green et al., 2016).

newcomers. Government's involvement takes place primarily at the local level rather than at the national level, although there is increasing peer-to-peer cooperation even among cities from different countries. Therefore, I concentrate here on cases of local governments' policies and municipalities' involvement in civil society initiatives to reduce anti-immigrant sentiments at the local level.

In the United States, the non-profit organisation Welcoming America promotes cooperation between local governments, NGOs and private sector actors in fostering integration among citizens and immigrants; moreover, it encourages all partners to devote their attention and resources not only to immigrants themselves but also to receiving communities. Interestingly, policy recommendations make explicit reference to contact theory and the importance of interaction in addressing citizens' anxieties and in supporting community building (Jones-Correa, 2011). For instance, in California, the municipalities of Redwood City and Oakley cooperate with NGOs and the private sector to foster positive interactions. Oakley, a small city hosting a large Latino minority and other immigrant communities, launched the 'You, Me, We, Oakley!' programme to 'be proactive in avoiding any tensions that may arise due to the changing demographic' of the city. Residents are encouraged to 'come together and better understand one another, appreciate each other's stories, and recognize their common desire to build a stronger, safer and more vibrant community.'[12] This includes creating opportunities for citizens and immigrants to 'meet and exchange stories' as well as 'exploring immigration and the role of immigrants in the community through workshops, book and film discussions.' A 'digital storytelling video' has also been created to collect brief narratives of immigrant residents. Analogously, the municipality of Redwood City, whose Latino community is also growing, has been promoting a wide range of initiatives, such as community dialogues and community dinners which have gathered hundreds of participants, and a 'welcoming café' event which aims to 'create empathy and action' (Redwood City 2020, nd). Moreover, Redwood City organized an exhibit called 'Faces of the Community' displaying 150 portraits, which have also been collected in a video and in a photo book. Briefly, Oakley and Redwood City have been promoting both direct contact through face-to-face interaction and vicarious contact through communication initiatives, including storytelling.

European cities also demonstrate increasing attention towards local-level integration and some of them are adopting policies which are not only targeted to newcomers but also to host communities at large. In the UK, the British Inclusive Cities network participated in a learning exchange with two American cities supported by Welcoming America (Broadhead, 2018b). The

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12   See the 'About us' pages on the 'You, Me, We, Oakley!' website (You Me We Oakley, nd).

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aim of the network is to support six cities (Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Liverpool and Peterborough, with London joining as an associate member) in promoting newcomers' inclusion. Although newcomers themselves appear as the main targets, interaction policies involving citizens' participation feature among the goals. Peterborough's inclusion plan, for instance, emphasises the goal of 'bringing communities together,' with the local authority funding 'local initiatives to promote integration, for example those which promote and build a sense of civic pride, celebrate local events or those that bring people together around a common cause or issue' (Broadhead, 2018c). Despite such policies not being explicitly meant to counteract anti-immigrant sentiments, they clearly aim to promote positive contact and enhance social cohesion by fostering positive emotions.

Interaction initiatives in Europe have also been devised to promote contact between citizens and refugees in the aftermath of the recent so called 'refugee crisis.' In Germany, which hosts a large share of the refugees living in the European Union, the city of Stuttgart is a prominent example. Among a wide range of integration policies, known as the Stuttgart's 'way' or 'model' (Eurocities, 2018), the municipality has promoted the Stuttgart Refugee Dialogues, with the aim of creating 'spaces where people can come together, talk and get to know each other and learn about their respective life experiences – refugees, volunteers and especially inhabitants and neighbours of refugee homes' (Cities of Migration, 2017).

While interaction policies promote a bidirectional process of adjustment between citizens and immigrants, citizens themselves clearly emerge as the primary recipients of communication policies, especially those directed at dispelling myths and prejudices. A prominent example is the Barcelona Anti-rumours Strategy, which explicitly aims to 'dismantle and disassemble rumours and stereotypes that hinder the intercultural process because they are the germ of racist attitudes, discriminatory practices and/or populist discourses that foster fear and mistrust among people' (City of Barcelona, nd). Barcelona Anti-rumours Strategy involves organising public forums, including docufilm projections and theatre plays followed by debate,[13] as well as disseminating materials ranging from YouTube videos to infographics and even comics.[14] The comic 'Blanca Rosita Barcelona' is presented as an explicitly pedagogical tool devised to describe some discriminatory situations that migrants encounter in Barcelona and to counteract rumours and stereotypes. Moreover, the municipality has trained 'Anti-rumours Agents': ordinary people whose role it is to counteract the spread

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13   See 'Catàleg d'Activitats Antirumors' (City of Barcelona, nd).
14   See 'Materials Antirumors' (*ibid.*).

of rumours and stereotypes in everyday conversations.[15] The pioneering case of Barcelona is not unique: similar anti-rumours communication campaigns have also been spreading in other European cities, with the support of the Council of Europe (De Torres Barderi, 2018).

Local governments' interest in inclusive narratives and storytelling also emerges from the activities of the British Inclusive Cities network. Narrative change has been chosen as a key priority for all six cities (Broadhead, 2018c). Inclusive Cities policy recommendations include a preliminary understanding of public opinion, a careful use of data and a dialogic attitude. Emphasis is given to storytelling, including ordinary people's personal stories and 'localised versions of national stories' (Broadhead, 2018a). Bristol's action plan, for instance, identifies 'developing a consistent narrative of inclusion' as the first priority. The goal is to 'improve cross cultural understanding and reduce community tensions, achieved through developing a shared understanding of the inclusion of migrants which inspires confidence for the majority of local people' (Broadbent, 2018c). Cardiff has also received funding through URBACT III Rumourless Cities to develop communication policies, building on methodologies and practices developed by Barcelona (*ibid*.).

Local governments' communication initiatives can have a positive impact not only on improving relations between citizens and existing immigrant communities, but also on preparing receiving communities to deal with the arrival of newcomers. For instance, refugees' and asylum seekers' relocation may be perceived by locals as abrupt and unexpected, particularly in small towns and rural areas, as the case of Lewiston (Maine) illustrates. Residents of this small American town largely feared that their community was about to be overwhelmed by the relocation of numerous Somali refugees in 2001. However, the municipality effort to educate community members about the new immigrants, to 'dispel myths about them and explain the circumstances that prompted their move to the United States' effectively contributed to reducing anxiety and resulted in more welcoming attitudes on the part of residents (Jones-Correa, 2011: 6-7, 24-25).

As a matter of fact, local governments are currently more active than central governments in resorting to direct and vicarious contact to reduce anti-immigrant sentiments and promote the inclusion of newcomers. Indeed, there are good strategic reasons to focus on the local level when countering intergroup hostility: local governments have more detailed knowledge about the area they administrate and may be in a better position to devise appropriate initiatives to reduce the appeal of populist anti-immigrant sentiments in that

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15   See 'Curs d'Agents Antiumors' (*ibid*.).

specific population. However, counteracting anti-immigrant sentiments is not necessarily a local matter only. Central governments may play a crucial role, both in devising and in boosting policies which will then be applied locally. For instance, when it comes to counteracting anti-immigrant sentiments, general guidelines might be elaborated at the national level, thus requiring local governments to conform to goals and values that have been identified at the national level. Hence, central governments might also shape the contents of local-level policies. Moreover, central governments might provide funds enabling local administrations to carry out local policies. Briefly, different levels of government might be involved in counteracting anti-immigrant sentiments.

Civic education policies to counter anti-immigrant sentiments: two worries

The previous section argued that modifying people's attitudes towards immigrants is empirically possible. It has been shown that direct and indirect contact shapes such attitudes and that positive contact can reduce anti-immigrant sentiments. A few cases have illustrated how local governments in several European and North American cities already take actions to discourage xenophobia, promote immigrants' inclusion and foster social cohesion through interaction and communication policies. Moreover, it has been suggested that central governments might also be involved in devising and enabling such measures. Both local and central governments can intervene to shape citizens' attitudes towards immigrants. This brings us to the central normative issue: provided that some of these policies have a certain efficacy, are they legitimate? Governments' direct engagement in discouraging anti-immigrant sentiments may be considered morally disputable on both liberal and democratic grounds. I will examine a liberal worry first, and then consider a further troubling implication that civic education policies might have on democratic electoral competition.

A liberal may object to a government's intervention in counteracting illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments pointing to liberals' commitment to individual autonomy. Let us call this the Liberal Worry. According to the Liberal Worry, governments should never interfere with individual autonomy. Therefore, they should not use censorship to limit freedom of expression, and, more fundamentally, they cannot limit freedom of conscience (i.e. eradicate or impose beliefs). As a matter of fact, liberal governments do sometimes limit freedom of expression: for instance, in some countries there are laws punishing hate speech or forbidding apologia for fascism or Nazism. Whether and when should states prohibit certain acts (including speech acts) is disputed, and this leads to interesting questions concerning coercion and whether prohibition

constitutes a form of coercion. However, this paper does not discuss the moral permissibility of policies aimed at constraining citizens' *behaviour*, such as anti-discrimination laws in schools or in the workplace, laws punishing hate crimes or laws punishing public apologia for fascism or Nazism. The aim of this essay is to consider whether it is morally permissible for liberal democratic governments to interfere with citizens' *sentiments*.

What is at stake here are policies directed at encouraging citizens to develop sentiments towards immigrants which are compatible with the basic values of a liberal democratic state, which may entail abandoning or nuancing their previous ones. Such measures can be defined as civic education policies, in which the state exerts a persuasive power. Corey Brettschneider distinguishes between a state's coercive power, i.e. the ability to place legal limits on behaviour, and its expressive power, i.e. the ability to influence beliefs and behaviour (Brettschneider, 2012: 3). Persuasion may involve rational argumentation. However, it may also appeal to emotions, or indirectly recall values without openly stating them. While some might argue that persuasion is less intrusive than coercion, since it does not coerce citizens to perform certain actions (nor to abstain from performing certain actions), others might point out that civic education policies pose a deeper challenge to liberalism, since they shape beliefs and emotions. A key precept of liberalism, as Joppke notes, is that law and public policy can regulate only the external behaviour of people, not their inner motivations (Joppke, 2010). It may thus be objected that liberal democratic governments are not allowed to recur to any civic education policy, including those based on contact theory, because this is not compatible with the commitment to individual autonomy.

Counteracting populist anti-immigrant sentiments also raises a serious democratic worry. The Democratic Worry points to the effects of civic education policies on fair electoral competition (Thompson, 2002). Reducing anti-immigrant sentiments may undermine the electoral success of those parties which rely on such sentiments to mobilise votes. Indeed, there is empirical evidence suggesting that positive contact reduces radical-right voting through diminishing threat perceptions (Green et al., 2016: 12). Since right-wing populism currently relies on anti-immigrant sentiments, a liberal government's interference in counteracting illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments would also indirectly alter the electoral competition. This might be considered a particularly serious violation of fair electoral competition, where the government itself devotes public funds to policies which disadvantage right-wing populist parties. Furthermore, such policies seem to be particularly manipulative, since they could be used to progressively limit political representation only to those electors who hold liberal views on immigration without publicly outlawing illiberal parties.

The Democratic Worry thus obliges us to consider not only the moral but also the political implications of civic education policies.

Therefore, taking the Liberal and the Democratic worries seriously seems to lead us to a dilemma: from a liberal democratic point of view, populist anti-immigrant sentiments should be counteracted, because they are at odds with the basic values of a liberal democratic state, such as freedom and equality, but it seems that it is not permissible for a liberal democratic government to persuade citizens to abandon such sentiments and to adopt liberal views. Thus, either the government remains neutral, avoiding any influence on citizens' sentiments towards immigrants, or it violates some of its own liberal democratic principles to persuade citizens to adopt liberal sentiments. Note that these worries apply to both central and local governments, which play a key role when it comes to the interaction and communication policies illustrated in the previous section. Indeed, local governments too are elective bodies: thus, they are expected to respect the principle of electoral fairness and are bound by the basic liberal constitutional values that constrain central governments, including autonomy, which is strictly connected with freedom and equality. The next section tries to offer a way out of this apparent dilemma. First, it argues that civic education in principle is not incompatible with liberalism, since a liberal democratic state is not bound to neutralism. Second, it provides a set of criteria that justify the use of some civic education policies to counter populist anti-immigrant sentiments, showing that they can be compatible with both the liberal value of autonomy and the democratic value of electoral fairness.

A liberal defence of civic education policies to counter populist anti-immigrant sentiments

The previous section expressed two worries connected with civic education policies aimed at counteracting populist anti-immigrant sentiments. The Liberal Worry is the most fundamental: if it were true that a liberal democratic state must be perfectly neutral and that a government is never entitled to interfere with the attitudes of those who are under its jurisdiction, no civic education policy would be permissible at all. Neutralism would require that the state refrains from promoting or expressing any particular set of values (Brettschneider, 2012: 9). However, a liberal democracy needs not to embrace neutralism in order to be coherent with respecting pluralism and autonomy. Indeed, liberal theorists do not seem to argue in favour of such a radical claim. To begin with, civic education is widely considered legitimate when it comes to children and adolescents. David Miller observes that liberal societies often include 'preparation for citizenship' as part of the school curriculum. Miller moves from the descriptive to the normative when he adds that liberal societies

'are not hesitant about promoting liberal and democratic principles among the rising generation, nor should they be' (Miller, 2016: 137). In fact, civic education provides 'a combination of useful knowledge and normative guidance' and 'it is a reasonable assumption that liberal democracies work better when all of their citizens share this basic knowledge and the accompanying principles' (*ibid*.: 137).

Still, one could point out that civic education might be compatible with liberalism when it comes to school students precisely because they are not considered adult, autonomous agents yet: they are still would-be citizens, rather than citizens.[16] It could be the case, thus, that a liberal democratic government might devise civic education policies to reduce the formation of populist anti-immigrant sentiments among young students, when they are underage, while nothing should be done if adults hold and express them. If so, there seems to be a double standard when it comes to adult migrants: some liberal theorists argue that it is perfectly legitimate for a liberal state to engage in projects of civic education and cultural integration for immigrants, aimed at making them more familiar with the founding principles of the liberal democratic state. What is more, some even argue that permanent residence or citizenship should be made conditional upon passing a civic education test, thus making civic education a legal requirement (Hansen, 2010; Joppke, 2010; Miller, 2016). For citizenship tests' defenders, immigrants seem to occupy a position similar to that of school students: although adults, grown-up immigrants are still would-be citizens. All in all, for liberal political theorists there seem to be at least two categories of people whose sentiments might be legitimately influenced by civic education policies: non-adults enrolled in school education, and non-citizens adults who desire to become citizens.

It might be suggested that only nationalist interpretations of liberalism could renounce neutralism and that, even so, civic education policies directed at children and immigrants would be exceptions to the norm of neutrality. At a closer look, though, even non-nationalist liberal democratic theorists agree that a liberal democratic state cannot be a neutral institution and that its persuasive power may also be directed at adult citizens. As Brettschneider makes clear, 'while liberal rights should be neutral in the sense that they protect all citizens regardless of the viewpoints they hold and express, the public values that underline those rights cannot be neutral' (Brettschneider, 2012: 27). This, he argues, is the crucial distinction between 'viewpoint neutrality' and 'neutralism': a liberal democracy may renounce the latter while endorsing the former (*ibid*.: 9, 73). Indeed, liberal democratic states explicitly express commitment to their

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16   Note, incidentally, that lack of autonomy makes children more vulnerable to indoctrination (Bialystok, 2014).

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basic values in constitutions, as well in legal pronouncements (such as those issued by supreme courts). Moreover, a state's public ethics are expressed in an implicit, veiled way in a number of circumstances, for instance when building monuments and establishing national holidays to celebrate people who defended such values, or events that marked progression towards a public goal, such as a free and equal society (Brettschneider, 2012; Wingo, 2003). Wingo notes that, 'unlike argumentation, […] veils bypass the explicit use of rational faculties, instead appealing to symbols and images that have been invested with meaning and emotional significance to shape the actions, habits and character of the citizens' (Wingo, 2003: 12; see also Nussbaum, 2013: 390). Thus, liberal democratic states do exert a persuasive influence on citizens, expressing the fundamental values of the political community and prompting citizens to embrace them. Furthermore, in several cases, such a persuasive influence involves the mobilisation of emotions, rather than relying on reasoning only. The use of the expressive power is legitimate and even required, because liberal democratic states should make clear which basic values lie behind citizens' rights and duties and defend them, while publicly condemning the violations of such values.[17]

This leads to the issue of what states should do to persuade citizens to develop sentiments towards immigrants which are compatible with recognising members of minorities of immigrant origins as free and equal members of the society they joined, and with a commitment to basic liberties and non-discrimination as enshrined in human rights law protecting those who seek admission. Carens notes that integrating immigrants requires 'a certain kind of public culture, one that recognises immigrants as legitimate members of society and treats them with respect' (Carens, 2005:44). Formal equality would not suffice, since its value 'is greatly reduced if the representatives of the state and the rest of the citizenry treat you as outsiders who do not really belong' (*ibid*.: 44). Civic education policies, I argue, are needed to create such a liberal public culture. This requires persuading people to abandon those illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments to which populist right-wing parties too often appeal. Not only behaviours, but also beliefs and emotions are publicly relevant when they conflict with the public status of individuals as having equal moral worth and deserving equal personal freedoms.[18] Therefore, a liberal democratic government is justified in countering illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments.

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17 The state's use of the expressive power is thus defensible not only in a perfectionist conception of liberalism, understood as a comprehensive moral doctrine, but also in a political conception of liberalism, where the state should respect a plurality of reasonable worldviews that converge on the basic liberal values regulating the public sphere (see Brettschneider, 2012: 20-21; Nussbaum, 2013: 7).

18 This is independent from whether individuals are morally responsible for all their beliefs (including stereotypes or implicit biases) and emotions. On the debate on the status of emotions conceived as either cognitive appraisals or somatic perceptions, see Bagnoli (2011).

I have argued so far that civic education policies can be legitimately addressed to adult citizens too and that liberal democratic governments not only can but also should use some kind of civic education policies to counter anti-immigrant sentiments and persuade citizens to develop beliefs and emotions towards immigrants which are compatible with the state's fundamental values such as freedom and equality. However, as the Liberal Worry and the Democratic Worry made clear, there are important limits to a government's persuasive power. According to Brettschneider, substance-based limits restrict the kind of views that the state is rightly concerned to transform, while means-based limits require that such views are not transformed through any method that violates fundamental rights (Brettschneider, 2012: 87-89).

In what follows, I provide five criteria that allow one to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate civic education policies that a liberal democratic government may pursue to counter populist anti-immigrant sentiments. These criteria, which provide substance-based and means-based limits, respond to both the Liberal and Democratic worries: criteria 1 to 4 help to identify civic education policies compatible with individual autonomy, while the fifth criterion ascertain their compatibility with fairness in electoral competition. Such criteria will be assessed in relation to the examples of civic education policies illustrated in the previous section: namely, interaction and communication policies inspired by contact theory. Thus, although the criteria constrain both local and central governments, local policies will emerge as primary targets.

Reasonableness: governments' civic education policies should only be used to defend the core values of liberal democracies and should respect the existence of multiple reasonable interpretations of such core values.

The first requirement demands respect for a reasonable pluralism. A government's policy, or a civil society initiative sponsored with public funds, should not present strong cosmopolitan or open-border views as the only reasonable alternative nor expect all citizens to adopt such views. A range of different views may be compatible with the basic liberal tenets which the state is allowed to promote. Thus, the views that such policies should encourage citizens to abandon are only those views which neglect transnational moral commitments towards non-members or deny freedom and equality to residents of immigrant origins. The reasonableness criterion seems to be more easily met by interaction policies: in fact, policies that facilitate face to face contact between native citizens and immigrants do not require the policymaker to convey a specific substantive view. By contrast, this criterion places stricter constraints on the content and the procedures adopted in communication policies. Communication policies may include events (such as public debates and conferences, public projections of

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fictional or documentary films, theatre plays and so on), printed materials (such as books, brochures, flyers and posters), online materials (such as websites, posts, pictures and videos shared on social media). Contents of communication events and materials may convey substantive values and partisan views. Therefore, a liberal government should evaluate contents carefully, in order to preserve room for reasonable disagreement and to promote a public narrative on immigration and integration which would be largely acceptable by citizens who share basic liberal values of freedom and equality.

Moreover, the way contents are presented should respect the recipients as autonomous individuals and promote their critical thinking. When it comes to the policy examples reported in Section 2, the reasonableness criterion seems to be met. The British Inclusive Cities network appears aware of the importance of respecting interlocutors, acknowledging that 'people want a conversation, not a lecture about why they are wrong' (Broadhead, 2018a). The Anti-rumours Handbook also recommends policymakers not to 'blame them from a position of moral superiority' and to avoid 'telling people how ignorant or racist they are' (De Torres Barderi, 2018).

Transparency: no manipulation or covert persuasion is allowed.

Liberal governments which devise, or fund, or promote civic education policies should openly state which values and moral goals inform them. This rules out covert, misleading or subliminal persuasion, including efforts to condition the recipients' sentiments subconsciously (see also Brettschneider, 2012: 88). Although direct interaction with immigrants is also known to influence attitudes by mobilising emotions, this criterion is particularly relevant when it comes to communication, especially storytelling. Compared with other kinds of information, reading stories, watching films, videos, plays or photos entail a stronger emotional impact. Moreover, as experimental evidence in social psychology shows, storytelling allows vicarious contact, which is a powerful tool in shaping intergroup sentiments. However, non-rational persuasion might be exploited to manipulate citizens' sentiments. Therefore, when using this means to convey an inclusive, liberal narrative or to counteract intolerant, illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments, governments should also provide accessible information on the goals they are seeking to promote, so that citizens are not only emotionally touched but also cognitively able to understand why such stories fit in the broader narrative and why the values expressed by the stories are grounded on the basic liberal values which inform public culture. Analogously, when it comes to policies involving direct contact, liberal governments should publicly declare the role such intercultural events play in promoting public goals, such as social cohesion, mutual trust and recognition, and show that immigrants'

inclusion is consistent with treating them as free and equal members of the host society. This is not to say that each event or communication, including music or movies, should be followed or preceded by an explicit statement, but it means that the goals of public policies should be accessible to citizens, for instance on governmental websites, in leaflets, or during informative events.

Non-discrimination: policies reaffirming liberal democratic values in relation to immigration should not stigmatise particular individuals and should respect individual privacy.

The third criterion, non-discrimination, would be violated if liberal governments specifically tailored their interaction and communication policies to re-educate a specific pool of citizens who are known or supposed to hold illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments. This is not to say that such policies should not have a target. On the contrary, interaction and communication policies might be specifically directed to those geographical areas which need it most, such as highly diverse neighbourhoods where intergroup relations are tense or openly conflictual, or neighbourhoods where reception centres for refugees are going to be opened. However, liberal governments should not target only lower-class, less educated or rural citizens on the presupposition that they would be more likely to hold xenophobic prejudices and anti-immigrant attitudes in general. Nor would it be permissible to identify particular individuals or groups as targets on the basis of some individual characteristics. This means that it would not be permissible to identify people who participated in populist right-wing parties' assemblies or showed appreciation and support for populist anti-immigrant sentiments on social media and create *ad hoc* polices. In this respect, the non-discrimination criterion overlaps with the transparency criterion examined above.

In fact, governments should not, for instance, rely on on-line data collection and profiling to identify those citizens who apparently hold populist anti-immigrant sentiments and covertly manipulate their views using microtargeted communication strategies, although such techniques might be efficacious in persuading them. It is true that, currently, 'a personalised, microtargeted online environment creates "filter-bubbles" where people are exposed to "more-of-the-same" information and encounter fewer opinions, resulting in increased political and ideological polarisation' (EDPS, 2018: 7). Therefore, using the same technology to increase web users' exposure to alternative views which might challenge or expand their own would somehow counterbalance this polarising tendency. However, it would violate both the transparency and the non-discrimination requirement. Moreover, since research suggests that 'the manipulation of people's newsfeed or search results could influence their voting

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behaviour' (EDPS, 2018: 7), it might also undermine the fairness of electoral competition.

Non-coercion: participation in government sponsored activities, such as direct interaction with immigrants or communication events on immigration-related topics, should be voluntary.

The fourth criterion requires non-coercion: not only should governments avoid requiring citizens to express their commitment to a given view, but they should not coerce them to attend compulsory courses in order to be exposed to such a view. Citizens should be free to decide whether to take part in events promoted by the government to foster interaction with immigrants or to discuss immigration related topics. Social integration cannot be a legal requirement: as Carens notes, 'in a liberal state, the government cannot tell people where to live or whom to marry or what people to have as friends' (Carens, 2005). Neither can the commitment to an inclusive public culture be tested and legally sanctioned. However, there might be incentives to encourage citizens to interact with immigrants or to participate, for instance, in public debates, workshops or training activities to learn how to deal with a growing cultural diversity in their neighbourhood or workplace. The challenge for a liberal government is thus to attract participants among those citizens who may have ambivalent, even negative, sentiments towards immigrants and be susceptible to populist rhetoric, making them feel welcome, instead of excluding and marginalising them.

Unsurprisingly, then, municipalities emphasise identification with an inclusive, local identity: despite holding divergent views on national or global matters, citizens might be more eager to cooperate when it comes to local issues.[19] Therefore, local-level interaction and communication initiatives might attract both those immigrants who tend to refrain from interacting with native citizens, and those citizens who tend to avoid contact with immigrants. Indeed, the identification with a shared local identity and the cooperation for a common cause, however limited, promote trust and sympathy among participants and provide a source of pride, thus fostering positive emotions. Furthermore, while neither interaction nor communication events may be compulsory, governments can still reach a wider public using communication campaigns which involve distant content dissemination: even those citizens who avoid all opportunities to meet immigrants or learn more about immigration during community meetings might still be influenced by effective communication campaigns.

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19   Cooperation on common projects related to local issues is used in community mediation to reduce conflicts and promote positive contact. Common projects may simply involve cleaning up the neighbourhood, as in the cases of Genoa (Italy) and Dudley (UK) (see De Luise and Morelli, 2012; Garry and Goodwin, 2011).

No partisan activism: civic education policies must not be devised *ad hoc* against particular parties or politicians.

Finally, not only should interaction and communication policies not convey a particularistic or partisan view to leave space for reasonable disagreement, as required by the first criterion. Such policies should also avoid endorsing a particular political party or advantaging it in electoral competition. Conversely, interaction and communication policies should not be directed at discrediting a party or a politician in order to disadvantage them in electoral competition. There should be no explicit reference to parties or politicians. This means that a liberal democratic government should not tailor the contents of its communication campaigns to harm their right-wing populist adversaries or use ad hominem and other fallacious arguments to reject populist right-wing views. The point would be to spread a convincing counternarrative which, if successful, would make public opinion less susceptible to populist anti-immigrant rhetoric. The cases presented in Section 2 all seem to respect this requirement. The city of Oakley even clearly states on the 'You, Me, We, Oakley!' website that the project is not affiliated to any particular party (You Me We Oakley, nd). Only Barcelona municipality mentions populist discourse among the issues that the anti-rumours strategy is fighting against. Nevertheless, what is at stake is populist anti-immigrant rhetoric, rather than populist parties.

As these examples show, populist parties per se are not the target of civic education policies. It is true that reducing illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments among citizens would eventually undermine their electoral success, given their current reliance on an anti-immigrant rhetoric, but this would be a side effect and would not impede such parties from reframing their campaign and remaining in the electoral competition. If populist anti-immigrant parties ceased to appeal to such sentiments and yet were able to keep or increase their popular consensus building on other ideological features (such as the antagonism between the people and the élite), interaction and communication policies would not undermine their attractiveness. Populist parties may have other ideological features which seriously challenge liberal democratic regimes. However, containing populism per se clearly falls outside the scope and the aims of civic education policies concerning immigration and integration.

Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to consider whether liberal democratic governments should devise civic education policies to counter widespread illiberal anti-immigrant sentiments which are currently fuelled by populist right-wing parties. A preliminary objection might have been raised against the feasibility

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of policies aimed at persuading citizens. Evidence from social psychology has been provided to support the claim that interaction and communication can influence people's sentiments and thus reduce hostility towards immigrants. Moreover, examples of actual policies and plans adopted by municipalities in several European and US cities have been presented. Thus, I have concluded that governments are capable of influencing citizens' sentiments towards immigrants. Therefore, the core of the paper has been devoted to the normative consequences of such an opportunity.

Two worries have been raised, from a liberal and a democratic perspective, concerning the moral permissibility of civic education policies directed to change citizens' sentiments. Such worries have helped to clarify that legitimate policies should be compatible with both individual autonomy and fairness in the electoral competition. I have argued that civic education policies aimed at persuading citizens to develop liberal sentiments towards immigrants and to counter anti-immigrant ones are not necessarily incompatible with such values and I have provided five criteria to discriminate between permissible and non-permissible policies.[20]

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