

## Why journalists should not use the expression 'semi-autonomous' (or 'semiautonomous')



Sometimes the media can use terminology that obscures or even misrepresents the message that honest journalists are trying to explain. [Brendan O'Leary](#) and [Khaled Salih](#) highlight how using 'semi-autonomous' to describe the constitutional powers of either Catalonia or Kurdistan may be unhelpful.



Glass candles forming Catalan and Scottish flags at a pro-independence demonstration in Edinburgh, Credit: [byronv2](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Some items of unintended misinformation have accompanied media accounts of both the attempted secession of Catalonia and Kurdistan's referendum on independence. A case in point is the widespread use of a mystifying expression which (in some newspapers) takes the form of the adjective, *semi-autonomous*, or *semiautonomous*, followed by one of the following nouns: province, state, or region. Variations on this expression are widely used by the New York Times (see [here](#) and [here](#)), the Washington Post (see [here](#) and [here](#)), the Financial Times (see [here](#) and [here](#)), and the Wall Street Journal (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

The label semi-autonomous may also be found in dictionaries, e.g., in [Oxford-online](#) or in [Merriam-Webster](#), where it is defined as meaning 'largely self-governing within a larger political or organizational entity.' But just because a word may be found in a dictionary does not confirm that it is good usage, especially if it misleads readers. 'Unicorn' and 'phlogiston' may be found in dictionaries, but no science reporter would use these expressions.

Consider the well-read person who knows no political science or law. They know, without looking up the dictionary, that autonomous means self-governing, and that semi- means half. So they would naturally understand a semiautonomous region to be half autonomous. But, is that what the journalist intends to convey when writing about Catalonia or Kurdistan or Quebec, or South Sudan when it was still within Sudan? And what, in any case, would it mean to be half autonomous – as opposed to one quarter or three quarters autonomous?

Now, ask another question of the same person. To wit: is an autonomous region more or less autonomous than a semi-autonomous region? Try the experiment with someone you know. We predict that the layperson, able to use English correctly – when not exasperated – will usually reply that an autonomous region is more autonomous than a semiautonomous region. After all, it stands to reason: one is autonomous, period; the other is merely half way there.

So we conclude that the media use of semi-autonomous conveys exactly the opposite of what honest journalists usually intend to imply. Normally the journalists are trying to say that the relevant entity has *more* autonomy (or self-rule or home rule) than is usually the case – either comparatively or within a particular political system.

### **Can we help out the hard-pressed journalist?**

Autonomy can be conceived of as a dichotomous variable, i.e., either the entity or organisation has it, or it does not. If autonomy is dichotomous, then 'semi-autonomy' makes no sense, and it should not be used at all. It's like being 'half-pregnant' – though being half-way through a pregnancy does make sense.

That last thought leads us to the obvious alternative. Autonomy can be conceived of as a continuous variable, i.e. it is something of which one can have more or less. Conceived this way, at one end of the scale there may be a zero level of autonomy and at the other end a maximum level of one hundred per cent (independence?).

No, we are not going to recommend that a journalist write that an entity such as Kurdistan has 94 per cent autonomy on paper, whereas Catalonia had 63.5 per cent (until recently). The journalist's job is difficult enough, but s/he should be able to recognise that on any scale autonomy will rarely come in at fifty per cent.

So what is to be done? We're sorry; a certain amount of tedium is needed before we can offer a solution. Sometimes autonomy is dichotomous, and sometimes it isn't. Either a region can borrow without the permission of the central or federal government or it cannot (that's dichotomous). But a regional government may have the ability to tax income autonomously with a variation of three per cent, above or below the rate set by the central or federal government, whereas another might not (here autonomy varies on a scale from minus three to positive three – compare the powers of Scotland's parliament with those of Northern Ireland's Assembly).

We're practical people. Instead of recommending that journalists scale and measure autonomy, let alone talk about dichotomous or continuous variables in a newspaper, we recommend the use of some easy words, such as 'more' or 'less,' and 'little' or 'very.' For example, if a journalist wants to convey the idea that Quebec has *more* autonomy than Prince Edward Island then that is what they should say, rather than describing Quebec as a semiautonomous region. We'll leave the said journalist to research the vexed truths regarding the powers of Canadian provinces (are they symmetrical or not?).

It would also be correct to write that, 'According to Iraq's Constitution the Kurdistan Region has more autonomy than provinces that are not organised in regions.' Or, that, 'The Baghdad government has never respected the extensive autonomy which the Kurdistan Region obtained in the Constitution of 2005.' Readers would then understand something true and important, while they would definitely be confused to be told that Kurdistan is a semiautonomous region whereas Basra is merely an autonomous province.

What is usually at stake therefore is whether the political entity being described has more and/or different powers to other entities within the same federation or union state. But sometimes what matters in the story being told in a newspaper is whether the relevant entity wants to increase its autonomy in some way, or simply exercise it.

In the case of Catalonia, Spain's constitutional court recently ruled out a political agreement, ratified by referendum, that would have increased Catalonia's autonomy. This legal fact partly explains why there is currently a secession crisis. The Spanish central government, through the supreme court, blocked a previously politically agreed expansion in Catalonia's powers.

In the case of Kurdistan, because the Baghdad government did not respect Kurdistan's powers of self-government, and many other provisions in Iraq's Constitution [67 out of 144 since you ask], its leaders went ahead with an independence referendum.

In one case, the central government invoked the constitution to stop secession – accurately in the case of Madrid, falsely in the case of Baghdad. In one case, Catalonia, the autonomists became secessionists partly because an increase in their autonomy was blocked; in the other, Kurdistan, they became secessionists because their constitutional autonomy was not respected.

Being semi-autonomous had nothing to do with either case: the expression is not just surplus to requirements but ensures that readers will only half-understand what is going on.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

*Note: The authors jointly advised the Kurdistan Regional Government during the making of the Transitional Administrative Law and the Constitution of Iraq in 2004-5. This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

---

## About the authors



**Brendan O'Leary** – *University of Pennsylvania / Queen's University Belfast*

Brendan O'Leary is Lauder Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, and World Leading Researcher Visiting Professor of Political Science at Queen's University Belfast. He is a former Professor of Political Science at LSE where his PhD won the Robert McKenzie Prize.



**Khaled Salih** – *University of Kurdistan-Hâwler*

Dr Khaled Salih is the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kurdistan-Hâwler, and co-edited *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* with Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry.