

# **A Mixed Methods Approach to Studying Women's Political Opinions<sup>1</sup>**

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## *Introduction*

The study of political behaviour within the discipline of political science, particularly in North America, has been dominated by research employing quantitative methods. This is also true of research in the discipline devoted more specifically to women's political behaviour and to the relevance of gender for political behaviour (see, for example, Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001). The method of choice is the public opinion survey, most often large-sample telephone surveys. When more qualitative methods are employed, the method of choice appears to be the face-to-face interview (see, for example, Lawless and Fox 2005).

One method that has received relatively little attention in this research area is the focus group; although very commonly employed in marketing studies, the use of the method involving gathering a group of individuals together in a room for a discussion has not received a tremendous amount of attention in the discipline. Where it is employed, it seems to be relegated to a supportive role for informing more quantitative methods. Compared with public opinion surveys, however, it has come under less criticism from feminist social science researchers as it has been argued by some to sit more squarely with a feminist methodology (see Wilkinson 2004).

This paper examines and compares the use of focus groups and the telephone survey method for investigating women's political opinions by reflecting on a research project that I have been engaged with for the past several years. This research project included several focus groups held with Canadian women in the summer of 2004 in which they were asked to discuss religion, feminism, and a set of political issues. In the spring and summer of 2007, it included a large randomly-selected sample telephone opinion survey in which women in English Canada were asked questions on a range of topics, including political attitudes, political engagement, feminism, religion, and a slightly wider range of socio-demographic variables than that usually collected to explain political behaviour. The paper argues that the use of a mixed methods approach brings significant benefits to the study of women's opinions and, in particular, for the increased use of focus groups within the discipline. It does so by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each method – one qualitative and one quantitative – and reflecting on their use in combination.

My approach to the discipline is solidly quantitative; the majority of my research employs quantitative methods of data collection and analysis but I am open to and recognize the benefit of employing more qualitative methods. In short, I believe that the research question ought to dictate the appropriate method to employ.<sup>2</sup> The dominance of quantitative techniques in my work stems from my statistical training in the disciplines of economics and political science. I additionally identify as a feminist and my openness to qualitative methods stems from independent learning, research and reading. My first academic invitation to contribute to an edited collection involved writing a chapter on the use of quantitative methods within feminist research (O'Neill, 1995). At the workshop where we were asked to deliver the papers, my presentation was interrupted by a researcher who turned to the editors and asked why my chapter was included in the volume given that feminists had largely discredited quantitative research methods. That experience galvanized my interest in methods, methodology and epistemology.

### *Comparing the Methods: The Theory*

Focus groups and opinion surveys are normally undertaken with different research goals in mind in that each method has a unique set of strengths. Focus groups are more qualitative, producing data that consists of texts and video that is then analyzed. Telephone surveys are more quantitative, producing data that consists largely of numbers assigned to categories. Focus groups are best at exploratory research; they provide an excellent method for the “elicitation and clarification of perspectives, the construction and negotiation of meaning, the generation and elaboration of hypotheses and a whole range of exploratory analyses” (Wilkinson, 2004: 287). Public opinion surveys are best at producing data that allow for hypothesis testing and generalizability. According to Babbie (2001),

Survey research is probably the best method available to the social researcher who is interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly. Careful probability sampling provides a group of respondents whose characteristics may be taken to reflect those of the larger population, and carefully constructed standardized questionnaires provide data in the same form from all respondents (238).

In short, the two empirical methods reflect differing approaches with unique objectives, ask fundamentally different questions, and provide different forms of knowledge.

### *The Qualitative Approach: Focus Groups*

The focus group method is neither simple nor quick and like all methods it can be undertaken in a more or less successful manner. As the method is less common in the study of public opinion than the survey method, a review is in order. The method is grounded in the interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, understanding reality as socially constructed and reflective of the context of the inquiry (Sale et al. 2008, Wilkinson 2004). The method consists of a small group of individuals sitting face-to-face in a relatively comfortable setting, engaging in a loosely-structured conversation. The conversation is guided by a moderator and structured by a moderator’s guide. The guide provides the set of general, open-ended questions chosen to elicit discussion around the research topic(s). The moderator is entrusted with ensuring that the conversation remains on topic, that dominant individuals in the group do not unnecessarily silence others, and with the responsibility for introducing probes designed to elicit further comment from participants. The groups are usually audio-taped and sometimes video-taped. These recordings provide the text of the conversations which is then analyzed to uncover themes and major narratives. Such analysis can employ qualitative analysis software such as NViVO or NU\*dist for example, but this is not required. The video tapes also provide a mechanism for assessing how the group dynamic plays into the discussions; facial and body expressions themselves, for example, can provide insight into how participants react to comments or other members of the groups, even in the absence of dialogue. This particular research method provides an opportunity for observing the emotions and actions that accompany responses.

The group dynamic of the conversation is an important element of focus groups that is often overlooked in analyses. Indeed, the unit of analysis is the group rather than the individuals within

it. According to Wilkinson (2004), “Focus groups involve the interaction of group participants with each other as well as with the researcher/moderator, and it is the collection of this kind of interactive data that distinguishes the focus group from the one-to-one interview” (272). Yet the reporting of focus group discussion often pulls individual comments out of the group dynamic rather than reporting on sections of the group conversation. Wilkinson argues that researchers ought to pay more attention to the interactive nature of conversation which can be especially important when discussing emotionally laden issues or stereotypes (2004: 288).

The group element means that one must carefully consider the composition of groups. One should avoid composing a group with people who hold very different opinions on the topic of the conversation. Focus groups are extremely successful at providing a window into the construction of opinion, the meaning attached to concepts, and the social dynamic surrounding opinion. Focus group members are not simply asked to give an answer to a question but rather are given an opportunity to reflect on the question, the answers of others, and to develop their attitudes in light of the discussion taking place in the room. This mirrors in many respects the manner in which political values and beliefs are shaped. According to Wilkinson, “the social context of focus group provides an opportunity to examine how people engage in generating meaning, how opinions are formed, expressed, and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others” (2004: 277). People take their individual experiences and try to make sense of them in the context of the collective discussion.

Focus groups also place greater control in the hands of the participants than other methods because they have the ability to control the flow and direction of the conversation. Whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage is a matter of debate. For Krueger (1988), this greater level of control in participants’ hands can create “inefficiencies such as detours in the discussion, and the raising of irrelevant issues” (Krueger 1988: 46). Groups can easily shift conversation towards themes not anticipated by the researcher and in ways that may or may be helpful to getting to the heart of the research question. Others, however, sees this as an advantage in that participants have the ability to shape and direct the conversation in ways that may not have been anticipated by the researcher beforehand (Morgan 1988). Such unanticipated shifts in conversation can be especially illuminating.

Focus groups nevertheless have their weaknesses. One is that the small number of people in the groups means that the discussions cannot be generalized to the wider population. As such, all and any claims about whether trends and attitudes exist in the wider population must always be kept at the level of speculation. This inability to generalize stems from the fact that groups, even when participants are randomly selected, are generally composed of between 6 and 10 participants. The discussion in focus groups ought not to be quantified in any manner (although they often are when reported in journal articles); with a small sample size, the breakdown of opinions or attitudes by participant type imparts a representativeness to them that is not warranted.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, while discussion in a comfortable group setting is likely to elicit responses that one might not receive with the use of a different method, it is also the case that the group dynamic can affect the discussion in less than helpful ways. A very vocal or strongly opinionated individual in the group can stifle discussion on the part of the other members. While the moderator ought to be able to control these dynamics, it isn’t always the case that it is easy to do.

The dynamic of ‘group think’ has been argued by some to lead participants to express a singularity of thought that is artificial and unlikely to reflect what occurs outside the focus group setting.<sup>4</sup>

Focus groups rarely provide the ability to learn much about any one individual in the group (Morgan 1998a: 32). The social sciences focus, and particularly that examining political behaviour, is on explaining individual level behaviour by an examination of situational and structural factors; focus groups limit the degree to which this is possible given that the group is the unit of analysis, rather than any one individual in the group.

Focus groups are a method that gives ‘voice’ to the participants; they are able to express their beliefs and opinions in their own words. But the process of interpreting those voices in order to bring them to a wider audience is not a simple one. The focus group method requires the transcription of tapes and the subsequent analysis of this data, which are both “extremely painstaking and time-consuming processes” (Wilkinson, 1998:123, emphasis in original). This step can be particularly daunting for those with little training in qualitative analysis or for those who strive for as much objectivity as possible in their research, that is, ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding 2004). This point is made by Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne (2007) when they cite Gorelick (1996)

After all, it is I who asked the questions, I who read the transcript, I who selected the materials to be placed in the text ... It is when I am trying to be most faithful to their meaning ... that I am most painfully aware that simply “giving voice” is not so simple after all ... It is fraught with interpretation (302).

### *The Quantitative Approach: Telephone Surveys*

Telephone surveys dominate as a method of inquiry in the study of public opinion. As such, a detailed review of the method is unnecessary. Instead, a brief review focussed on the key objectives of the method is in order. The survey method is grounded the positivist paradigm which assumes an objective reality that can be tapped through empirical indicators exhibiting both validity and reliability (Sale et al. 2008). The objective is to assess causal relationships using large representative samples. Telephone opinion surveys are less well suited, although not unsuited, to exploratory research than other methods including focus groups.<sup>5</sup> Instead, collecting attitudinal and behavioural data from a large representative sample (usually the minimum is 1,000 people) has the benefit of providing the best method for accurately describing large populations and for hypothesis testing. Like focus groups, successfully administering an opinion survey requires that a number of decisions be made including ones related to the structure and content of the survey instrument, sampling the population, and the analysis and interpretation of the data. A failure to attend to these issues can lead to the collection of poor quality data. The weak *application* of the survey method ought not to be confused, however, with weaknesses inherent to the method itself (de Vaus 1996: 356).

One key to the success of the survey method rests with the survey questionnaire (or instrument). The questionnaire must include all the necessary question at the start of data collection; moreover, the questionnaire cannot be changed part of the way through data collection as this

will introduce error in the data (one wants variation in responses to be due the results of answers given and not due to a change in the question wording) and lead to a loss of comparability across responses. The goal is to minimize subjectivity through the use of standardized questionnaire that is delivered in a consistent manner to all respondents. The aggregation of the data assumes the use of common wording and a consistent delivery across all respondents.

Another key to success involves producing a probability sample of an acceptable size; this step is crucial to one's ability to generalize the results to the population from which the sample was drawn. Modern telephone sampling employs software packages to randomly select telephone numbers from certain areas and with certain prefixes to avoid cell phones – random digit dialling (RDD). The rules of probability, on the other hand, dictate the size of sample that should be drawn in order to increase the chances that the sample will accurately reflect the characteristics of the underlying population.<sup>6</sup>

Telephone surveying has become increasingly technically sophisticated. In addition to random digit dialling, CATI (computer assisted telephone interviewing) software allows interviewers to read questions directly off the computer screen, ensuring that questions are in the proper order and that filters are properly followed, and data is entered as the interview proceeds. These innovations allow for tremendous efficiencies but they come at a price. As such, academic researchers normally hire polling firms to conduct their data analysis. This also saves on costs for such things as computer equipment and the training of interviewers. But hiring a firm to conduct an opinion survey is not *inexpensive*; the cost necessarily varies with the expertise and experience of the firm.

Hiring a firm to conduct the interviewing means that the process of data collection is largely 'out of the hands' of the researcher. Miner-Rubino, Jayaratne and Konik note that the middle stage of survey research ('the books') is when "accepted survey research protocol should be followed so that bias is minimized" (2007: 206). A researcher's perspective is most applicable during the beginning (i.e. selection of the research question) and end stages (i.e interpretation of findings) of the survey research process, that is, the 'bookends' (Ibid.). The importance of a *strong objectivity* during the middle stage of survey research is critical to its (Harding 2004). Given increased technical sophistication, however, the researcher places significant trust in firms hired to collect the data.

One advantage of the survey method is that it allows you to speak to a large number of people in a relatively short time period and without having to travel to get to them. This can be tremendously important in a country that is as geographically dispersed as Canada in that the survey can be administered from a central location. Travelling to interview people face to face is time consuming, physically tiring, and expensive. Another advantage is that the method allows you to collect a breadth of information on a representative sample; it has been argued that "it is better to generalize on the basis of less but representative information than on the basis of more information about cases of unknown representativeness" (Garson 171: 87). The method may not be deep in terms of the type of information collected, but it is rich in spanning a breadth that is important for hypothesis testing in the social sciences. Actions and attitudes are shaped by a wide array of social forces and the survey provides the most efficient method for tapping as many of these as possible from a representative sample of the population.

An additional strength of the survey method is the ease of replicability that accompanies it. One need only employ the questionnaire on another sample to ascertain the reliability of the results.

The survey method is not, however, without potential weaknesses. While the data are necessary for generalizability, they are often not 'rich' in the sense of fleshing out a comprehensive understanding of why people think and act the way that they do. There is a degree of artificiality and superficiality in survey questions and the data that they generate; they collect responses that are divorced from a social context. In a related vein, surveys have been criticized for reducing people to numbers (see Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne 2007). Responses to survey questions are assigned numbers, grouped into categories and statistical analysis employed to assess the strength of relationships. Responding to a question with a limited number of response categories is necessarily less nuanced than responding to an open-ended question, although the latter are sometimes employed in surveys. But the goal of opinion surveys is not the creation of a rich data set providing insight into the social dynamic behind opinion and identity formation; the goal is the production of a data set that allows for the testing of hypotheses in order to develop reliable knowledge.

There are also always concerns related to the reliability and validity of responses. The telephone survey method employs verbal responses only (no sense of physical reactions to questions), which are more often closed than open-ended, and respondents are not provided with a significant amount of time to consider their responses or to return to a question to change their response. As such, incomplete or inaccurate recordings of behaviour and attitudes can occur; this can be especially true of questions related to socially-desirable and undesirable behaviour and beliefs. Reliability relates to the degree to which the same question asked at a different point in time without recall would produce the same response; validity addresses the degree to which the question asked taps the concept of interest. Question wording is especially important for both.

Survey questions have to be written in such a way as to ensure not only that they are interpreted in a consistent manner across respondents, but also to ensure that respondents at varying education levels have no difficulty understanding them. Additionally, accessing a population that may not have wide telephone usage (e.g. Aboriginal population living on reserves in Canada) or that may not feel comfortable speaking on the telephone in a second language (e.g. some visible minority groups or recent immigrants) can be difficult. For groups such as these, a telephone survey would be poor choice of method.

Finally, quantitative data analysis requires knowledge of statistical techniques. Acquiring this knowledge is time consuming; knowing not only *how* to employ, but also *when* to employ specific techniques, can be difficult (Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne 2007: 318).

### *Mixing the Methods: The Practice*

The research project stems directly from graduate research undertaken in the early 1990s on the question of gender gaps in public opinion in Canada. The particular roles played by religious beliefs and feminist identification in shaping women's attitudes have since continued to be a research focus (see O'Neill 2001). The limitations of secondary data analysis made it apparent that to further my research agenda I needed to collect original data. A large research grant in

2002 allowed me to do just this.<sup>7</sup> As women's feminist identification and religious beliefs had not received significant research attention in Canada, the focus group method provided the appropriate vehicle for exploring a relatively new topic.

The focus groups were followed by a telephone opinion survey undertaken with two colleagues in the summer of 2007 entitled the Women's Political Participation Survey (WPPS). Funding for this stage of the project was cobbled together from several sources, and funding limitations required that one Canadian province, Quebec, be excluded from the sample. The 2002 grant did not include funding for an opinion survey; the ability to undertake this second stage of the project was only possible by involving two additional colleagues in it.<sup>8</sup>

The mixed methods approach was thus sequential: a qualitative approach was first employed to developing a richer understanding of the meaning that a small sample of women applied to the two key concepts in the study (feminism and religion) followed by a quantitative approach that employed indicators developed on the basis of the focus group discussions and tested several causal linkages between these concepts and a host of opinions and behaviours on a large representative sample of women. It was also complementary in that "the strengths of one method [served] to enhance the other" (Sale et al. 2008). The use of the term mixed methods often connotes a planned combining of different methods to achieve richer data. In the case of my research project, however, the mixing of methods occurred rather haphazardly and pragmatically. The availability of funding was the spur to follow up the qualitative project with the quantitative one. This is more often the case than most researchers will admit (Stewart and Cole 2007). Although I had hoped to undertake surveys at some point after having completed the focus groups, it was not clear at the time that funding to do so could be found.

### *Summer 2004 – Focus Groups*

The first project involved a set of focus groups that took place in various cities across Canada in the summer of 2004. The cities were chosen so as to only allow for variation in population size, but also in region of the country.<sup>9</sup> Each of the nine focus groups involved from 8 to 10 women and lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. The women were provided with refreshments and a \$50 honorarium for participating. The women were also asked to complete a short anonymous questionnaire before the group began, asking for basic socio-demographic information including year of birth, occupation and religious denomination.

For several reasons I decided to employ a public opinion firm to assist in undertaking the focus groups. For one, my lack of experience in moderating focus groups, recruiting participants, and in organizing venues were a challenge.<sup>10</sup> The administrative logistics alone of trying to organize focus groups in several cities across the country were fairly daunting. Moreover, as Canada is very geographically dispersed (over 5,000 km wide from the East to the West coast), more than one moderator was required in order to ensure that the focus groups took place in a relatively short time frame (to avoid having externalities change the discussion mid-way through the groups). After evaluating several different firms, I hired Pollara Inc. to assist with the groups. The firm assisted with the development of the moderator's guide, assumed responsibility for

establishing and organizing the venues, recruited the participants, moderated the groups, prepared audio and video tapes, and provided written summaries of the conversations.<sup>11</sup> Two women shared responsibility for moderating the groups.

Recruitment took place randomly via telephone, and attempted to ensure variation in the strength of religious and feminist beliefs across the groups. Two of the groups were composed of women with moderate to strong religious beliefs (Fredericton and Toronto 2), one was composed of women with moderate to strong feminist views (Vancouver) and the remaining groups were composed of women with a mixture of feminist and religious beliefs. Two additional factors were taken into account when recruiting women into the groups: age and ethnicity. The women were a diverse group: they ranged in age from early twenties to over 65, reflected a mix of ethnicities (including French, British, Irish, Scottish, German, Filipino, Ukrainian, Pakistani, Russian, Tibetan, Brazilian and Aboriginal among others), a mix of occupations (including nursing, clerical and administrative assistant, library assistant, customer service representative, medical laboratory technician, social worker, dietary technician, student and retiree) and a range of religious denominations (including, Roman Catholic, a range of Protestant denominations, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and Zoroastrian).<sup>12</sup> Each of the focus groups was video and audio taped; transcripts of the discussion were produced from the tapes.<sup>13</sup> The transcripts average about 40 pages and 15,000 words in length each.

Some of the groups took place in hotel board rooms and others in rooms in space occupied by the polling firm and established for the express purpose of conducting focus groups. I was present for half of the groups (I travelled from Winnipeg to cities east) and viewed them either from behind a one-way mirror or, when this was not possible, from a corner of the room. The moderator's guide (see Appendix) included a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit conversation on three broad topics: religion, feminism, and a range of political issues. The conversations in the groups appear to be relaxed and many of the women appeared to enjoy the discussion.

### *Summer 2007 – Large-Sample Telephone Opinion Survey*

The telephone survey necessitated employing the services of a polling firm, the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University, a company recognized as the leader in academic social research in Canada. ISR employed only female interviewees on the project given the nature of the topic to control for interviewer effects. A sample of women was selected through random digit dialling with some over-sampling of the smaller Canadian provinces. The survey itself was completed with CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) technology. I met with my colleagues for two days in February 2007 to establish a working questionnaire. Many of the questions were 'borrowed' from existing surveys, others were existing questions whose wording we modified slightly, and a number of others were original questions that we developed over the two days (see Appendix for a selection of questions included in the WPPS). All of the questions were closed-ended. We were asked to limit ourselves to about 80 questions in order to ensure that each interview lasted no more than 20 minutes, the generally accepted maximum time limit for a telephone survey.<sup>14</sup>

The use of CATI software allows for the data file to be produced as the information is collected. This is helpful for checking such things as limited variation in responses to a question that might

necessitate a modification in question wording or in the set of closed-ended responses, for example, or for identifying questions that are eliciting a significant number of don't know responses. We listened in on the first set of calls as the questionnaire was pretested and then met with the interviewers to go over any questions that they or the interviewees were having difficulty with; the following day we made some final modifications to the questionnaire based on this discussion and the results of the pre-testing.

Interviewing began in July but was not completed until October.<sup>15</sup> A total of 1,264 telephone interviews averaging approximately 18 minutes in length were completed with a random sample of women 18 years of age and older in nine of Canada's 10 provinces (Quebec was excluded from the sample).<sup>16</sup> The response rate for the survey was 59 percent, a very respectable level given current standards for politically themed surveys in Canada. ISR produced a codebook and assumed responsibility for variable coding (some responses, including occupation and postal codes, had to be recoded into numeric categories). The data file (or matrix) consists of 1264 cases and 142 variables.

### *Reflecting on the Approaches*

As a stand alone method, the focus groups provided a fruitful method for exploring the meaning that women attached to two social phenomena that had been undergoing significant change: religion and feminism. The focus groups allowed women to participate in a relaxed conversation where they heard what other women thought about feminism, religion and political issues. This, as much as the ability to voice their own opinions, appears to have made the experience an enjoyable one for the women. The women often prefaced their comments by referring to another's comments or views; it was then very much a conversation. Not only did the women have an opportunity to share their opinions and beliefs with others, some also welcomed the opportunity to learn from others.

The conversations in the focus groups reinforced research findings that identified generational differences in women's willingness to identify as feminists and their feminist beliefs. While many women in the groups agreed with the goals of feminism, many less were willing to identify as such, especially among the younger women. A number of the common stereotypes regarding feminists were brought up in the conversations. But this was often challenged by women who acknowledged the important work that had been undertaken by feminists and reinforced by a highlighting of the work that remained. In line with social identity and self-categorization theories, the groups offered a clear window into the subjective meaning of feminism and how that meaning is socially constructed (Huddy 2003).

Increased secularisation has also changed organized religion's place in women's lives. The discussions in the groups identified why religion continues to play such an important role in many women's lives. Women identified the strength they obtained from their faith/spirituality, the values they found to help guide their actions and beliefs, the community that their faith allowed them to participate in, the space – both physical and mental – that it provided for reflecting on 'higher' questions and the importance that they placed on ensuring that they

provided their children with these benefits as well. These closely follow theories developed in Sociology (see Furseth and Repstad 2006) that have received less attention in Political Science.

The transference of power from the researcher to the members of the group is also highlighted in feminist research methods and was important for the success of the project. The women in the focus groups had little difficulty ‘challenging’ the wording of some questions in the moderator’s guide. I purposefully employed the word ‘religion’ in order to ensure that the conversation was directed towards organized religion, my specific research interest. The women in the groups often moved the conversation away from religion, an organized form of worship, towards spirituality, a more personal form of worship that was not constrained by the doctrine of any one faith (O’Neill 2007). The method provided the freedom and power to participants to direct the conversation.

The focus group method also provided an opportunity for the participant learning or ‘consciousness raising.’ The discussion surrounding how women defined feminism provided some of the participants with an opportunity for challenging stereotypes about feminists and other with a chance for evaluating how their own beliefs corresponded with feminist beliefs. Many women began by noting that they were uncertain what feminism entailed but subsequently added to the discussion after having listened to others in the group expand on their definitions of the term. A number noted at the end of the group that they felt they had learned something, either about themselves, feminism or both. Feminist researchers commonly refer to this as one of the advantages of the method (Wilkinson 2008).

As a stand alone method, the telephone survey provides an opportunity for testing a number of causal linkages between feminism, religion/spirituality and political opinions and behaviour. Much of the hard crucial work of the survey method comes before you get into the field. The preparation of a questionnaire, particularly one that is developing new questions, can be especially time consuming (and frustrating). Developing question wording that adequately taps the attitude/value in question (validity) and is likely to be understood by the interviewees, that is easily read by the interviewers, that provides response categories that are exhaustive and mutually exclusive and with sufficient variation, is anything but simple and easy.

Part of the difference is due to how the instruments are employed. Questions in the moderator’s guide are read out loud, often repeated several times, and research participants have time to consider the question that is asked. Telephone surveys, on the other hand, are under tremendous time constraints; questions ought to be read once and no more. Complex topics and issues, for example, must be simplified for both the interviewee and the interviewer. Comprehension (understanding), retrieval (ability to recall information needed to answer the question) and reporting (ability to answer and in the required format) are three crucial elements to consider when designing survey questions (Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne 2007: 311). In comparison, focus groups questions are relatively vague by design to not direct the conversation that takes place in the group unnecessarily and do not provide pre-set response categories.

In part because of the differences in the questionnaires, the *conversations* that took place in the focus groups were very different from the *interviews* that occurred during the telephone surveys. The former were relaxed; the latter were sometimes strained, particularly when questions turned

to collecting socio-demographic information such as age and income. The telephone survey was a one-sided conversation, designed simply to elicit information from the interviewee. Participants in the telephone surveys completed the survey knowing little about how others viewed or thought about the topics raised. This ability to direct and indeed control the conversation is completely absent by design from the telephone survey. The speed of the interview, the fact that it occurs over the telephone, and that the respondent has little time to consider individual questions means that they follow rather than lead the conversation. These top-of-the-head responses are not in and of themselves a problem but they are qualitatively different than opinions given with more thought and time for reflection.<sup>17</sup>

The data collected in focus groups is rich in detail yet narrow in scope; that collected in surveys provides less detail (is more shallow) but provides wider coverage. There are definite tradeoffs in the type of data collected between the two methods. The richness of the information collected in focus groups comes at the expense of the ability to test causal hypothesis and to generalize beyond the limited sample; the expanse of the information collected in surveys comes at the expense of detail and in capturing subjective and socially constructed meaning.

To what extent did mixing the methods improve the knowledge gained from the research? The discussions in the focus groups provided a clear sense that faith needed to be conceptualized beyond the narrow concepts of membership in a religious denomination and attendance at services. This is largely how more quantitative approaches to the study of political behaviour have conceptualized religion: denomination (including a measure for evangelicalism), salience and attendance at services. Thus the discussion of the lived experience of religion in the focus groups improved the content validity of the indicator/measure employed in the opinion survey. The development of original questions that differentiated between spirituality and religious beliefs provided an ability to test the importance of this distinction in the wider population.

Similarly, the focus group discussions highlighted the lack of understanding of feminism, the stereotypes associated with feminists, and how both shaped identification decisions. The indicator/measure employed in the survey thus moved away from the often employed simple binary one (e.g. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?) to one that included the strength of feminist identify (strong feminist, not very strong or not a feminist) and a set of options for developing a better indicator of opposition to identification as a feminist (see Appendix).

Ultimately the goal of social science research is to better understand and explain behaviour; the use of the focus groups method helped to develop understanding of changing concepts with an under-researched group while the telephone surveys assisted in testing explanations that were developed from the insight gained through the focus groups. The latter point – that the two methods complement each other nicely – is one of the advantages often claimed to stem from mixing research methods. By starting with a more qualitative method, I was able incorporate the rich discussions into the construction of survey questions. And indeed, the ability to better capture the multi-dimensionality of concepts by using the Qual/Quant design has been identified by others (Leckenby and Hesse-Biber 2007). More than this, however, the focus groups established the importance of a concept that I would have completely missed had I jumped immediately into the more quantitative method (e.g. the importance of spirituality). The focus

groups also provided assistance with the choice of vocabulary and the phrasing of new questions that deviated from those employed in existing surveys (Miner-Rubino and Jayaratne 2007: 310).

### *Conclusion*

Political science has not wholeheartedly adopted the focus group method for investigations of political behaviour. It is only in the last decade that the focus group method has been described as “gaining some popularity among social scientists” (Fontana and Frey 1996, cited in Wilkinson 2004: 272). The survey method is much more dominant in research on women’s political behaviour. The study of women’s political behaviour may well require a move away from traditional explanations and methods for it is clear that they have only gone so far in explaining gender gaps. The use of more qualitative methods provides a greater likelihood of opening up the study to wider range of influences.

The benefit of the focus group method is strongest when conducting research in areas that have not been the focus of much attention. The focus groups were, for instance, tremendously insightful on the topic of women’s faith and spirituality, areas that have received relatively little in-depth attention in women’s political attitudes and behaviour. They assisted in developing an understanding of how women experienced religion, why it was important in their lives and how it was to be distinguished from a more personal spiritualism.

When the conversation in the focus groups turned to a topic that has received more focussed attention, the results confirmed conclusions that had been reached elsewhere and added ‘flesh’ to existing research. In this research project, for example, the focus groups provided a better understanding of women’s willingness to identify with feminism and the women’s movement. The importance of confirmation ought not to be discounted.

The importance of survey research for the ability to accurately describe women’s attitudes and beliefs cannot be overstated; the importance of the data for hypothesis testing is also tremendously important. Developing explanations for behaviour and attitudes that apply to populations is crucial to understanding women’s behaviour and for the development of reliable knowledge.

Additionally, the benefits to combining the two methods ought to be underlined. The survey instrument that was produced in the second stage of the research project was significantly improved by the focus groups that took place in the first stage.

Grounded in differing paradigms, the focus group and survey research methods rest on fundamentally different assumptions and seek to answer very different questions. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to argue for the recognition that qualitative methods can do more than simply inform quantitative ones. But the degree to which the discipline will accept the use of more qualitative methods for their benefits beyond just a supportive role is up for debate. Many of us are trained to place a “high value on quantification” and we are imbued “with a suspicion of alternative methods and non-positivist science” (Mednick 1991 as cited in Wilkinson, 2004:

288). This leads to difficulty in publishing results developed from qualitative methods in mainstream outlets which lessens the likelihood that the dominance of the quantitative methods will diminish. Indeed, the model adopted in my project of using a qualitative method to inform a subsequent quantitative project can promote “the misconception that qualitative research is only exploratory, cannot stand on its own, and must be validated by quantitative work because the latter is ‘scientific’ and studies truth” (Sale et al. 2008:370).

Increasing the importance assigned to qualitative methods also requires that graduate methods training expand to include an understanding of both paradigms and training in a much wider selection of methods for the qualitative collection and production of text is no less difficult than the production and analysis of numerical data.<sup>18</sup> Qualitative methods are relatively invisible in many of the discipline’s research methods textbooks, directly reflecting the limited demand for them in the classroom. This is unlikely to change until there is a concerted effort to train a new generation of researchers familiar with a wider range of methods, who possess the skills to employ them effectively and the insight to understand their potential in the production of knowledge

## Appendix

### Selection of Questions from the Focus Group Moderator's Guide:

#### Religion:

What role, if any, does organized religion play in your life today? Do you consider yourself to be religious? In what ways? What makes you a religious person?

Is religion something you experience on your own, or do you consider it something you participate in as part of a group?

Is it possible to consider someone as religious if they do not participate in "organized religion" the way we have defined it here? Why? Why not?

Are religion and spirituality the same thing? Why? Why not?

Aside from a place of prayer, are there any other functions that an organized religion or religious group can play?

Do you do any of these things? Why?

#### Feminism:

What does feminism mean? What does it encompass for you?

How relevant is feminism to your own life?

Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why? Why not?

How do you express yourself as a feminist, if at all? What do you do, say, believe...?

Is feminism something you can practice on your own, or is it something that is better accomplished as a group? Why?

### Selection of Questions from the Women's Political Participation Survey 2007

#### Religion and Spirituality:

Can you tell me your religion, if you have one?

Do you believe that the bible should be taken literally word for word?

In the past year, how often have you attended religious services, other than for special occasions such as weddings and funerals? At least once a week, at least once a month, at least 3 or 4 times a year, once or twice a year, or not at all?

Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: Being a member of a religious community is important for the social benefits that it provides.

[Filter - if no religion] Would you consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

In the past year, how often did you engage in spiritual activities, on your own, such as prayer or meditation? At least once a week, at least once a month, at least 3 or 4 times a year, once or twice a year, or not at all?

How important is your [spirituality OR religion] to you? Very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important?

How important is your [spirituality OR religion] in helping you get through life's difficulties? Very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important?

Do you find that you get a lot of comfort from your [religion OR spirituality], some comfort, a little comfort or none at all?

Do you consider yourself to be a strong feminist, not a very strong feminist, or not a feminist at all?

[Filter - if not at all] Is that because the feminist movement is too extreme, because feminism is no longer needed or because you are not really sure what feminism is?

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Methods of Studying Gender and Political Participation Workshop, University of Crete-Rethymno, Greece, May 2008. I thank the participants in that workshop for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> This argument has been made by the Perestroika movement in American political science community. Tripp (2006) has also identified methodologically driven research trends: over 66% of the top 57 doctoral programs in the United States require training in quantitative methods and over 90% of articles published in the *AJPS* between 1985 and 2001 “involved statistical analysis and mathematical modeling” (257-258). Qualitative methods remain a distant second cousin in the discipline.

<sup>3</sup> Sale et al. argue that this move to quantify qualitative research stems from pressure “exerted from the quantitative camp for qualitative research to ‘measure up’ to its standards” without understanding the basic premises of qualitative investigations (2008:371).

<sup>4</sup> This argument against the use of focus groups in my research was raised by a discussant at a conference.

<sup>5</sup> Not all surveys are completed over the phone. Alternatives include paper questionnaires completed by the respondent or by an interviewer and Internet (Web) surveys.

<sup>6</sup> The technical elements to sampling are laid out in most texts devoted to quantitative methods. See, for example, D. A. de Vaus, *Surveys in Social Research* (1996).

<sup>7</sup> The grant application was successful when it was submitted to a committee that included Women Studies. A granting agency officer suggested that my application would be more positively received by that committee, both because it proposed to study only women and because it employed focus groups, than a similar application that was rejected a year earlier by the Political Science Committee.

<sup>8</sup> I invited two Canadian political scientists with an interest in gender and political participation to join the research project: Elisabeth Gidengil at McGill and Lisa Young at Calgary.

<sup>9</sup> Region has consistently proven to be an important determinant of political behaviour in Canada. The provinces are normally divided into several regions: Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island), Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) and British Columbia.

<sup>10</sup> In hindsight, the discussion in the focus groups may have been more informative had I chosen to act as moderator. This was due to the fact that I knew the kind of information that I was seeking given my research question and, as a result, would have been more successful at probing for further information at key points in the conversation, something that the hired moderators, who largely stuck to the script of the guide, did less well.

<sup>11</sup> The copies provided to me were unfortunately not verbatim. As a result, I hired research assistants to transcribe the groups for me a second time.

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, individual responses cannot always be linked to the background socio-demographic information collected for the respondents.

<sup>13</sup> The focus group held in Montreal was conducted in French. The discussion was translated and transcribed by Pollara Inc.; note that this transcription was not verbatim.

<sup>14</sup> The 80 question limit was surprisingly difficult to meet especially when trying to comprehensively address feminism, religion, political participation and attitudes, and socio-demographic factors.

<sup>15</sup> ISR ran into staffing problems in the summer which were compounded by the union regulations governing hiring practices at York University which resulted in delays in the completion of the survey.

<sup>16</sup> The decision to exclude Quebec from the sample was driven by funding constraints. The small sample size of the WPPS made it impossible to pull a sample from the province of a size sufficient to be able to speak to its women’s particular history with religion and feminism. Funding will be sought at a future date to extend the research project to women in Quebec.

<sup>17</sup> Surveys have begun to incorporate experiments and question variation designed to mimic the debate and challenging of opinion that takes place in the political arena. While these are helpful in provide an additional level of understanding in political thinking, their addition to surveys limits the number of remaining questions that can be asked and, as such, must be used sparingly.

<sup>18</sup> I am the first to admit that I find statistical analysis ‘easy’ and text analysis ‘difficult’ given my training and experience. Working with methods that use very different modes of analysis has confirmed for me the importance of the methods training that we provide to graduate students in our disciplines. If we expect students to choose a method that is appropriate to the research question in the project, this is only likely to occur if we have provided them with the training that makes this decision a relatively easy one.