Le Pen vs Macron: after an acrimonious debate, the French will now choose their next president

As the much-anticipated, key policy square-off ahead of Sunday’s French election, the presidential debate was a riveting two-and-a-half hours of cantankerous insult trading, in which neither centrist Emmanuel Macron nor the National Front candidate Marine Le Pen pulled their punches.

A polite way of viewing the moderation by two of the country’s top journalists would be to say that it was “light”, for they certainly barely intervened – except for an occasional reminder about which of the candidates had used up more time, according to the very prominent clocks displayed on their desks.

Coming just days before the run-off election, Macron came into the debate leading by a comfortable 19% in most polls. But there are still many undecided or uncommitted voters who may have been among the 20 million people who watched the debate live.

For the first hour, the topics centred on the economy, unemployment, social security and taxes. Le Pen consulted her dossiers several times to accuse Macron of being in charge during various plant closures; fake facts that were denied both by him and later by the media. She painted him as a “savage globaliser” who was in thrall to financiers and big business, even labelling him “Monsieur Bankron”.

He called her a liar several times, and took her bait by replying to the accusations. In the process he was temporarily derailed from laying out his own policies. Nonetheless, he did settle down and discuss them in much more detail than she did.

The second hour was ushered in with a switch to security, terrorism, border controls and the European Union. Here, Le Pen came out swinging:

We have to close our borders against terrorism, straightaway, immediately. That’s what I’ll do immediately after my arrival in power.

Macron countered with:

Closing borders achieves nothing. There are many countries outside the Schengen area that have been hit as hard as us by terrorist attacks. And since 2015 we have put back border controls to fight terrorism.

She argued for security measures that included expulsions, stripping radicalised youths of their citizenship, and closing down extremist mosques. She accused Macron of “submission” to the Islamist movement. She declared it was scandalous that 11,000 people were on the terrorism “watchlist”.

He argued that all people needed to find a place inside the republic, and that some were being let down by the system, including the education system. He called on everyone to examine their consciences.

Macron said he would have “zero tolerance” for terrorism, and said the best counter-terrorism work could be done in co-operation with EU institutions. He accused her of falling into the terrorists’ own trap by promoting hate speech, division and “a civil war”. At one point he cast her as “the high priestess of fear”.

Both candidates demonstrated theatrical Gallic disdain, easily worthy of their predecessors Jacques Chirac, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and François Mitterrand. Several times Macron asked Le Pen to do him the courtesy of not interrupting; the moderators tried this tack too. But essentially they both argued over each other like a pair of bickering teenagers as their parents watched on, confused.

So, who did better? France 24 called it for Macron. Both Le Monde and Libération called it “an impossible debate”, referring back to Jacques Chirac’s 2002 refusal to debate with Jean-Marie Le Pen, the then head of the National Front.

Le Monde decided that in the “ambient cacophony” of the candidates’ exchanges it was not certain that either one of them had been heard, and that no “battle of ideas” had taken place.

Le Figaro asked its online readers which of them was most convincing. Of the 49,269 who had replied after seven hours, 64% voted Macron to 36% for Le Pen.

It must be remembered that France remains in a state of emergency, and volatility inside the electorate is unpredictable. Just three days before the first round of voting a policeman was shot dead in central Paris – and the French have lost more than 230 people in terrorist attacks since January 2015.

It is impossible to predict how many of the electorate will abstain from voting or spoil their ballots on the day. “Neither Macron nor Le Pen” is a slogan that has been taken to the streets.

Additionally, nobody can be completely sure who the supporters of the losing candidates from the first round will choose. While right-wing François Fillon asked his supporters to vote for Macron, left-wing Jean Luc Mélenchon simply advised that they shouldn’t vote for Le Pen.

The French are being asked to choose between two different visions – one from Macron that looks externally to EU partners in trade and security, or one from Le Pen that closes its borders and yearns for a “Frexit” from Brussels. The latter did come up with the best line of the debate when she provoked Macron with the proposition:

In any case, after this election, France will be led by a woman: it will be me or Madame Merkel.

What is clear is that after Sunday, whoever wins will need to build a coalition with the same politicians from mainstream parties that they beat in the first round.