French debate won't change voters' minds: Observers

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From L-R: Luc Dupont, an associate professor in Communication at the University of Ottawa; Kathy Brock, Queen's University political and constitutional expert; and Richard Thibault, Quebec City-based communications expert.

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Postmedia News asked Canadians with different areas of expertise to watch Wednesday's French debate and provide their impressions: Quebec-based communications expert Richard Thibault; and University of Ottawa communication professor Luc Dupont offer their comments on what was accomplished during Wednesday's discussion, while Kathy Brock, professor of political science at Queen's University, critiqued the leaders' performances in both debates.

- Kathy Brock is an associate professor in the School of Public Policy and political studies department at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont. She has published a number of books and academic articles on Canadian politics and citizen engagement, among other topics.

Q: Who gained and who lost?

A: Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff came out with concrete ideas and wasn't so much on the attack and Conservative leaderStephen Harper was able to defend his positions much better than he did during the English debate, Brock said. NDP Leader Jack Layton didn't do as well as during the English-language debate and he got hit a couple of times by Bloc Quebecois leader Gilles Duceppe, who came out ahead Wednesday night.

"(Tuesday) night he was a little bit lacklustre, but tonight he seems full of fire. He's playing on the Quebec vote and playing to that strongly."

Q: What surprised you?

A: "Listening to the questions by the hosts — I was surprised that they would be much more confrontational," Brock said, such as when moderator Radio-Canada's Anne-Marie Dussault went after Harper over the budget. In part that can be chalked up to the rough and tumble of politics in Quebec, Brock said.

"The other thing that surprised me is that Harper is better in French than Ignatieff," Brock said, adding that Ignatieff stumbled a bit over his words. "Harper, in contrast, his voice is calmer, it's more controlled and he's making his points more effectively."

Q: Will what happened sway voters' intentions?

A: "That is harder to say because there's still time before the election to recover from any faltering. What it will do is make it clear to the leaders where they need to build support," Brock said. "There's as much passion in politics as reason, sometimes more. This gives people a chance to respond to the leader's platforms not just on a rational level, but also on an emotional level."

- Richard Thibault is a Quebec City-based communications expert specializing in public speaking and crisis management. Before founding his consulting firm, RTCOMM, he served as moderator of debates and was public affairs officer at Quebec's National Assembly from 1979 to 1987.

Q: Who performed best during the French debate?

A: "There is no clear winner," Thibault said. "All four leaders are giving a decent performance. Like in the English debate, Stephen Harper managed to maintain his calm despite the attacks from his opponents. There is one difference with the previous debate: the leaders, especially Michael Ignatieff, took the time to present their platform."

Q: What surprised you?

A: "There was no knock-out punch or major surprise," Thibault said. "However, I expected Jack Layton to concentrate his attacks on Gilles Duceppe, considering the NDP is making gains in the province. But he instead chose to split his attacks (between) Harper, Ignatieff and Duceppe."

Q: Will this debate make any difference in how people vote?

A: "The first half-hour of the debate was soporific with the coalition talk, I'm sure a lot of viewers tuned out quickly. The leaders' performance will only comfort their support base."

- Luc Dupont is an associate professor at the University of Ottawa with a focus on political communication and image. He has also written several books about advertising techniques and branding.

Q: Who performed best?

A: "Michael Ignatieff really improved his performance," over Tuesday's debate, Dupont said. "He corrected two major mistakes from the English debate: he looked straight at the camera and also talked more about his platform. Had he given that performance Tuesday, he could have made some gains. The clear loser is Jack Layton: he didn't talk much in the first hour when more people are watching."

Q: Will this debate make any difference in how people vote?

A: "I really doubt it. The debate was off to a horrible start with the debate on the coalition. These are technicalities that voters don't understand and don't care about."

— *With files from Marianne White and Jordan Press*

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