

Trump Mocks Harris's Height. But Her Fans See a Certain Stature.

Kamala Harris is modest in stature, but is considered by some to have Tall Energy. Donald Trump has insisted she shouldn't be allowed to use "boxes or artificial lifts" during the debate.



Listen to this article · 6:47 min [Learn more](#)

By Abby Ellin

Abby Ellin is an author, a journalist and a former columnist for The New York Times. She stands 5 feet 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches tall.

Sept. 10, 2024 Updated 7:45 a.m. ET

With Tuesday night's debate approaching, Kamala Harris's height — she is 5 feet 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches tall — came up over the weekend as a potential issue during the event.

The former President Donald J. Trump, whose reported height is 6-foot-3, called attention to their size discrepancy on his social media platform, Truth Social, saying no accommodations should be made to make them appear closer to the same size.

“No boxes or artificial lifts will be allowed to stand on during my upcoming debate with Comrade Kamala Harris,” he wrote. He added that such accommodations — which he claims Michael Bloomberg once demanded — would be “a form of cheating.”

Ms. Harris has not commented on whether she has made a request for any sort of lift. But seeing the candidates together may make many who tune in for the debate aware of her actual height for the first time — a reality that could have been previously masked by what some call Tall Energy.

Ms. Harris’s relatively modest height, and how people tend to get it wrong, has come up before.

In signature prosecutorial fashion, she addressed the issue during a January interview with Katie Couric in which Ms. Couric recited a Wikipedia entry that had Ms. Harris erroneously listed as 5-foot-2. Ms. Couric, no giant at just under 5-foot-4, said she was excited to discover that “Kamala is short like me.”

“That is absolutely incorrect,” Ms. Harris said with a smile that suggested she was accustomed to such comments. “With heels, which I always wear, I’m 5-7½, thank you very much.”

The average height of an adult American woman is 5 feet 3½ inches tall, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (for men, it’s 5-foot-9). But that’s beside the point. Even in her beloved Chuck Taylors, which offer little in the way of height assistance, Ms. Harris, to many of her supporters, *seems* taller than she is.

For some, that is because Ms. Harris exudes Tall Energy, a vertical state of being more commonly linked with the statuesque, but sometimes co-opted by more petite women. The vocal powerhouse Kristin Chenoweth, at 4-foot-11, has it. So does the 5-foot-1 Lady Gaga and the 5-foot-2 Reese Witherspoon.



While Ms. Harris insisted to Katie Couric that her height is often boosted by heels, she frequently wears Converse Chuck Taylor All Star shoes. Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

“Tall Energy is the confidence that comes from being above average height,” Nicholas Rule, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto who researches social perception and cognition, said of the concept.

Mr. Rule said that people tended to respond to taller people in a particular way for evolutionary reasons. In most nonhuman primates, size determines who will win the battles to reproduce. That is why animals make themselves larger when they feel threatened. It is also why some studies have shown that taller candidates typically win elections; they're considered more dominant, more formidable and stronger. And it's why other studies have shown that taller people are often rewarded with more money, greater promotions and more dates.

“Being taller makes people think you're more competent, and being a winner makes you more confident,” said Barry Bogin, emeritus professor of biological anthropology at Loughborough University in England and the author of “Patterns of Human Growth.” Mr. Bogin, 74, said he was 6-foot-1 in his heyday and recalls getting into trouble while goofing around with shorter friends in elementary school. “The teacher said she expected more from me,” he said. “It was backhanded positive feedback.”

Never has Tall Energy — or its corollary, Short Energy — been as evident as it was when pandemic restrictions began to lift and colleagues began meeting one another in person for the first time, coming face to face (or not) with people they had been communicating with for the months, or even years, in “Brady Bunch”-like squares. The results, for some, were mind-blowing.

That was certainly the case for Camille Sweeney, an author and one of the creators of Future Me, a career prep program in New York. She was thrown for a loop when she met some members of her online writing group in person for the first time. Ms. Sweeney expected the organizer, a philosophy professor, to be tiny. “She was smart and perky and wore big glasses, and I

just thought she was small,” recalled Ms. Sweeney, who is 5-foot-8. Instead, the professor was lithe and willowy and hovered around six feet tall. “Your perception of someone is one thing, and it was like a blind date,” Ms. Sweeney said. “I was intimidated — and I’m not short.”

Ms. Sweeney acknowledges that her own biases may have affected her perception. Her mother, a “small but mighty force,” is only 5-foot-2. Ms. Sweeney connects shortness with getting-it-doneness, a trait the philosophy professor clearly possessed.

It is similar for Kristen Berman, the 5-foot-1 chief executive of Irrational Labs, an applied behavior science consulting firm in Oakland, Calif. She often hears that, despite her height, she gives the impression of being much taller.

“People are surprised when they meet me,” she said. She can’t really square her diminutive stature with her own image of herself. “I find when I look at other women my height, I’m surprised,” she said. “I don’t see myself as that short. Playing it bigger, louder, with more humor can make a difference. I think that’s a learned behavior over time.”

Still, just to be extra safe, she always stands up straight, shoulders back, sternum forward. And she wears heels at networking events.

The actor Tom Cruise is below average in height for an American male, but he exudes a confidence that can make him seem taller to some people. Aurelien Morissard/Associated Press

Tall and Short Energy aren't just female attributes. Tom Cruise is about 5-foot-7, but some fans might be unaware of that. "Part of it is the way he carries himself," said Adam D. Galinsky, author of the forthcoming book "Inspire: The Universal Path for Leading Yourself and Others," who is a professor of leadership and ethics at Columbia Business School. "What you might call Tall Energy I might call Being-in-Control Energy," he said. "This person knows what they're doing. They make people feel protected. They'll have your back."

To that end, James Madison, the fourth president of the United States who was known for his contributions to the Bill of Rights, stood only 5 feet 4 inches tall, with some believing he was far shorter than that.

While Ms. Harris is competing against a tall man in the presidential election, Mr. Rule and Mr. Galinsky stressed that her size shouldn't be a liability, because women are expected to be more petite than men. If she were running against, say, Michelle Obama, who is 5-foot-11, or Nikki Haley, who is 5-foot-6, that might be a different story.

And in the end, individuals' actual height isn't the point; what matters is how tall they *seem*.

No one knows that better than Ms. Harris. "My mother was all of five feet tall," she said in a video posted to Facebook for Mother's Day in 2019. "But if you ever met her you would think she was seven feet tall."

Abby Ellin has been contributing to The Times since the late 1990s. She is the author, most recently, of "Duped: Double Lives, False Identities and the Con Man I Almost Married." More about Abby Ellin