

3 Things to Keep Me From Rolling My Eyes at Your White Privilege

Gabriella Cazares-Kelly, a community organizer from the Tohono O'odham Nation, presents three best practices for White allies trying to meaningfully engage with people from underrepresented groups at meetings, protests and events.

Gabriella Cazares-Kelly COLORLINES APR 26, 2018
[HTTPS://WWW.COLORLINES.COM/ARTICLES/3-THINGS-KEEP-ME-ROLLING-MY-EYES-YOUR-WHITE-PRIVILEGE](https://www.colorlines.com/articles/3-things-keep-me-rolling-my-eyes-your-white-privilege)

I am a community organizer for a grassroots organization serving the Tohono O'odham Nation, a Native American community that you've likely never heard of. My reservation is located in Arizona and is the size of Connecticut, but even most Arizonans are unaware of our existence. My organization, [Indivisible Tohono](#), encourages civic engagement and education within the Tohono O'odham Nation, because O'odham voices have been largely disregarded and dismissed by the mainstream society. In short, we're underrepresented in every way imaginable.

My work has pushed me to get more involved in the mainstream political arena. More and more I am finding myself in traditionally White spaces—board meetings, town halls, candidate forums, and Democratic

Party meetings. I can also be found at protests and rallies, where I'm rubbing elbows with people I'd like to believe are like-minded.

But the sting of underrepresentation is ever-present and usually shows up in the form of microaggressions or unknowingly racist comments.

Often, White people tell me that I'm "articulate" or "well-spoken," as if they are surprised I can communicate. On sidewalks, sometimes in the middle of protests, people ask me obscure questions about federal Indian policies expecting me to be an expert on Native American history.

One well-meaning White ally recently shared her assumption that all of the people on my reservation are required to register to vote when they apply for food stamps.

For three days I tossed and turned and practiced how to tell her that what she said was racist and offensive. For one, she assumed that everyone in my community uses food stamps. Perhaps even more dangerous was that she was using her assumption to imply that my community doesn't need voter outreach and education efforts directed at it.

When I pulled her aside and gently explained to her why her thinking was problematic, she listened with wide eyes and a smile on her face and said, "I'm sorry, but you're the first tribal member I've ever met." This internal struggle about when, where and if to confront this racism is a constant and it's exhausting.

I am also encountering more and more people of color who are bearing the burden of the demand for representation. We continuously hear things like, “How can we get a more diverse crowd?” “Why aren’t people of color showing up?” “People of color need to vote.” Each time I want to scream, “Why would I want to bring my friends of color into spaces like this?”

Yes, we’re doing our part. We are calling out racism and microaggressions and teaching people, sometimes literally on the streets, how to be better allies. But that effort can’t be one way. Here’s a few ways that White people can show up for the people of color coming to your meetings.

1. Get to know us.

Over the past few months, I have been in three separate activist and political spaces where I was the only person of color in the room or one of only a handful. In two of these meetings, I’ve been offered leadership positions literally before I’ve even introduced myself.

Stop. Doing. That.

Get to know who I am as a person. Find out what my values, interests and skills are. Find out what I do for a living and what my other time commitments are. Find out if I’m even interested in representing your organization. Don’t offer me a leadership position simply so you can brag about your diversity. Offer me a position when you’ve seen my skills in action and you believe I would be an asset to your organization.

2. Show up for our events.

Show up to our fundraisers, protests, fairs, film screenings, powwows and art exhibits and be engaged. I've been participating in your culture for years and years. Now it's time for you to step out of your comfort zone for a few hours. Come to my event and listen and learn. Don't use my event for recruitment; in fact, keep your flyers at home altogether. If you value my viewpoint as a person of color, spend some time surrounded by it, especially if I've invited you. Building community is about getting to know people as individuals, learning names and building trust.

3. Give us enough time to speak.

Over the past year, I've been invited to share about my community and the issues that affect us a handful of times. Most often, I'm given 10 minutes, but it always turns into an additional 20- or 30-minute question-and-answer session. I need more time because what is common terminology or cultural understanding to me may need to be explained to people outside our community. So the next time I'm offered a 10-minute time slot, I'll be informing the organizer that I will need 20.

There are many things you can do to support the few people of color who are showing up to your meetings, but almost all of them center around you treating us like individuals and taking the time to get to know us. Every community is different and we're all learning about one another. Although things feel frantic, we have to quit rushing the building of relationships. This isn't a race. We're not just learning to

come together to oppose the Trump agenda or to create more diverse photo opportunities. We're building relationships that will transcend the current political climate and will help push progressive, intersectional and truly equitable ideas and legislation forward.