

How Brian Schatz Is Becoming The Senate's Chief Science Nerd

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Brian Schatz didn't start out as a science nerd.

After attending Punahou School and then majoring in philosophy at Pomona College in California, he returned to the islands, ultimately becoming an influential figure in Democratic politics, and spent nearly a decade as the CEO of Helping Hands, one of Hawaii's largest nonprofit social services agencies.

But since he joined the U. S. Senate in 2012, Schatz has emerged as a prominent national voice on technology and the environment, pushing for bipartisan consensus in contentious areas.

He has become a fierce advocate for telemedicine, the environment, net neutrality and data security — topics that make many people's eyes glaze over. Taking on complex topics that others choose to avoid has become an important way the Hawaii Democrat can make a difference in a legislative chamber dominated by Republicans.

Supporters said he learns the nuances of difficult topics through diligent efforts to understand various political perspectives. Internet expert Gene Kimmelman, president and chief executive officer of Public Knowledge, a nonprofit group that supports an open internet, described Schatz's approach to Civil Beat in an email:

Like all issues, he seems to approach tech policy by carefully studying the issues and talking extensively to all relevant stakeholders to make sure he knows all the facts. He's one of the most studious and conscientious members of the Senate who cares passionately about freedom of expression and consumer protection.

At a confirmation hearing Nov. 1, Schatz criticized Jim Bridenstine, the presidential nominee to head the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, for his lack of a science background, suggesting this made him unqualified for the job. Bridenstine, a former naval aviator and space enthusiast who was director of the Tulsa Air and Space Museum, does not have a science or engineering degree.

“This is a science agency,” Schatz said of NASA. “I get that you don’t have a science-centric background, and I don’t begrudge you that. I don’t have a science background, but you know what I *do* do: I defer to scientists.”

Long-Distance Health Care

Schatz is not a doctor, either, but his father was, and health care technology is another of his major interests. For the past several years, Schatz has sponsored bipartisan legislation to expand telemedicine, which allows people to get medical care remotely without the need to visit a doctor in person.

It saves patients time and money and it has the power to substantially reduce health care costs. Schatz has had to overcome entrenched opposition from the politically powerful American Medical Association and some Medicare officials.

In an interview with Civil Beat in May, Schatz said he was making good progress on the issue, which he said could “transform the entire health care system.”

His prediction may be coming true: [S. 870](#), sponsored by Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah and backed by Schatz, passed the Senate in September and a companion bill is moving through the House. It would allow Medicare reimbursement for some telemedicine services that have been restricted in the past, giving people access to services on other islands and even on the mainland without needing to travel there.

Separate pieces of legislation he advocated have been swept into that bill, including measures he co-sponsored with other senior Republicans, including Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi and Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, under a bill called the [CONNECT for Health Care Act of 2017](#).

On Wednesday, [at the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank in Washington, Schatz talked up the bill and described how telehealth could improve the lives of people in rural areas, including Hawaii’s neighbor islands. He recalled visiting a community health center in Lanai in August, and seeing first-hand how important it is for the 3,000 residents there to be able to get health care — a diabetes check, a dentist visit, or to see a psychiatrist — without getting on a plane.

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Even busy urban professionals would appreciate an expansion of telehealth, he told the audience.

“Telehealth helps people get on with their lives,” Schatz said. “Workers can keep working instead of taking time off to go to the doctor, home-bound patients will be spared the trek to the doctor. Telemedicine will change lives and save money and improve the quality of care.”

He urged conservatives to investigate the idea and support bipartisan efforts to expand the technology and reimbursement for the costs of it.

“My pitch to you is this is the opportunity to unleash the power of the private sector, the power of science, the power of technology, in a way that is consistent with progressive values — I want to increase the availability and quality of care — and conservative values — because

conservatives want to make sure we are spending every penny wisely,” he said, earning polite applause.

Applauding his efforts a lot more loudly are telehealth activists and lobbyists for the technology firms that will provide the software for the services.

In an [interview with a health care blog](#), Health Care Pit Stop, Krista Drobak, a partner in Sirona Strategies, a health-care consulting company, said that she believed Schatz was the single most important person pressing for the expansion of telehealth.

“Members of Congress care about telehealth, but there haven’t been many members of Congress other than Brian Schatz from Hawaii who have really rolled up their sleeves, dug in and said, ‘This is an important issue and we need to get this done,’” she said in the interview.

Climate Change And The Islands

Schatz declined interview requests from Civil Beat to talk about the ways he is making himself a science specialist.

He has had a busy week — first jetting off to Bonn, Germany, with four other Democratic senators to observe the climate change talks, participating in an interview on climate change with Democracy Now, and then speaking at the CATO Institute soon after his return from Bonn.

His No. 1 issue, and the one for which he is probably best known, is his leadership role in combatting climate change. On Tuesday, on “Democracy Now!” [he told interviewer](#) Amy Goodman, who had also traveled to Bonn for the conference, that Hawaii residents expect him to take a strong stance in defense of the environment.

Coral like this reef in Kaneohe Bay is under threat from climate change.

Courtesy of Raphael Ritson-Williams

“Hawaii feels so passionately about climate,” he said. “You know our oceans are warming. You can actually see it. There was a summer during which the whole south shore of Oahu, you could see the bleached coral almost across all of the surfing spots. And so it’s gone from an issue that only environmentalists cared about to an issue that almost everybody in Hawaii cares about, because it’s really affecting our quality of life.”

His interest in climate change can sometimes border on obsessive, however, and his efforts to highlight how other people are failing to toe the line — and say the right things — can make him appear to be so argumentative as to be ineffectual.

At the recent NASA confirmation hearing, for example, he pressed Bridenstine for statements the Oklahoma congressman had made on the reasons for climate change, whether humans were to blame or not, demanding he respond with a single word “yes” or “no.” It came across as an effort to score debating points, given that Bridenstine represents a state heavily dependent on the oil and gas industry.

Another Democrat speaking soon afterward, Sen. Tom Udall of New Mexico, took a less combative tone and secured a pledge from Bridenstine that he would protect the integrity of NASA’s scientists from political interference.

Cyber Wars

As the political temperature remains at a near-record high in Washington, Schatz's rhetoric has become more heated, too.

For example, dozens of organizations, including the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and the Democratic National Committee, have suffered significant data breaches in the past five years. The federal government has done little to pursue and prosecute hackers responsible for the breaches or executives who have been derelict at securing their computer systems.

But at a recent hearing, Marissa Mayer, the former chief executive officer of Yahoo, and executives at credit reporting agency Equifax, both of which have had major data breaches that jeopardized the personal information of millions of people, were pilloried for a problem that has become widespread.

Schatz chastised both for failing to protect consumer data.

“Net neutrality has a new champion: Meet Sen. Brian Schatz” — Headline on the technology website CNet

“People back home, not just home where I live, but home to where all of us live, don't understand how the CEO of Equifax and the CEO of Yahoo walked away with \$90 million and \$27 million and possibly a quarter of a billion dollars in stocks,” Schatz told them. “This is unfathomable to me and to the average person.”

Schatz has also become an outspoken advocate for net neutrality, the principle that all people and all companies should have equal access to the internet and equal speed of communication.

The debate has pitted content providers, who fear their customers could lose high-speed access to their products, against internet service providers, who want to be able to set their own terms of service, including charging people more for faster service.

Some 2.2 million people have written to the federal government, many protesting the Federal Communications Commission plan to overturn Obama-era regulations ensuring equal access to the internet. Under Obama, the FCC declared internet companies to be “common carriers” that it had the power to regulate to ensure that equal access.

In a Reddit forum over the summer, Schatz held an open forum on the topic and said this:

Last month, Trump's FCC began the process of repealing these rulers, even though there's only one constituency that wants it: internet service providers. It's easy to see why. Internet service providers or ISPs want to control the way you use the internet because it is good for their bottom line ... We can't let them take that away from us.

Next month the FCC is expected to enter the final stages of overturning the regulations, and there is likely to be considerable criticism of the process. Schatz has become one of loudest voices of opposition in Congress to those efforts.

“Net neutrality has a new champion: Meet Sen. Brian Schatz,” said the headline on an article in CNet, a technology website, in May 2017.