

[Hawaii](#)

# Schatz: Congress Needs To Stop ‘Ignoring The Needs Of Native People’

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The Hawaii senator says Democrats have a unique opportunity to address centuries of racism, in part through funneling more resources to Indigenous communities.

By [Anita Hofschneider](#) / July 2, 2021

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When Hawaii Sen. Brian Schatz took the reins of the Indian Affairs Committee in February, he found out that its staffers were making less money than any other Senate committee.

The realization underscored how little clout the Indian Affairs Committee had in the Senate and the challenge of getting Congress to prioritize Indigenous issues. Schatz raised the salaries and hired more staff. But his ambitions are a lot bigger.

“The way I look at the work we’re doing is to try to understand all those injustices, where and how they occurred, what the scars are, and then to try to reverse them in a systematic way,” he said. “Because, remember, all the

injustices were imposed in a terribly systematic and thoughtful and planful way.”



Sen. Brian Schatz says that Native issues should be considered in every Senate committee, not just his.

Schatz’s leadership of the Indian Affairs Committee comes at a critical time for Indigenous peoples in America. People in Native communities such as the Navajo Nation have disproportionately died from the coronavirus. The pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have brought increased national attention to racial disparities and historic injustices against people of color.

Democratic President Joe Biden has made advancing racial equity a key administrative goal. He appointed Deb Haaland the first Native American head of the Interior Department.

“We’re in a unique moment in American history,” Schatz says. “We have both chambers and an appetite to try to redress hundreds of years of racism manifested through federal law and federal action.”

### **An Infusion Of Resources**

To Schatz, that mainly means pouring more money and resources into Indigenous communities. And he’s making sure that includes Native Hawaiians. Before he was chair, he even blocked the passage of a version of a federal housing bill that excluded Hawaiians.

Last week he [co-introduced another version of that bill](#) that includes money for the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands.

So far, Schatz’s focus on funding has drawn praise from some leaders in the Native Hawaiian community who are anxious for more support.

“We’re definitely happy to see him in that chairmanship,” says Robin Danner, who leads the Sovereign Council of Hawaiian Homestead Associations.

She hopes he uses that role to press the federal government to fulfill its trust responsibilities to Native Hawaiians.

Kuhio Lewis, executive director of the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, said Schatz’s leadership role is already paying dividends.

“Sen. Schatz being in the role that he is in is already providing opportunity for Hawaiians,” he said. “Money is coming in. Is it at the same level as other Native people? No, but it’s a step in the right direction.”

According to Schatz, the American Rescue Plan that was passed in March was the “biggest one-time infusion of resources into Native communities in American history,” and included more money for Native Hawaiian health, education and housing than in decades.

But when it comes to the broader movement to return land to Indigenous peoples, Schatz is not optimistic about what he can do.

“I’m for eliminating the filibuster,” he said. “But as long as it stands, there are certain things that we just couldn’t get 60 votes for.”

Returning land from the federal government to Hawaiians is one of those things, he said.

One of the best-known land issues that Hawaii is grappling with is the question of whether the Thirty Meter Telescope should be built on Mauna Kea. During a summer of widely publicized protests in 2019, Schatz largely stayed quiet.



Schatz said his role in the controversy over planned construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope on Mauna Kea is just to encourage dialogue.

Now he says it's a state issue that is intertwined with the history of poor land management on Mauna Kea.

“You also have to go back further than that and understand that the original sin was the overthrow and that the federal and state government had formal policies to dispossess Hawaiians from their land and their culture and their language and their ability to make a living. And so if you're talking about this only as a telescope ... you're kind of missing the point,” he said.

He is hopeful a recently formed state commission with Native Hawaiian representation will help find a path forward but said his role is just to encourage dialogue.

“I like the idea of a Thirty Meter Telescope peering into the sky,” he said. “I would love to find a way for this to be found consistent with Hawaiian values.”

Schatz sees a huge part of his job to remind his colleagues about Indigenous peoples. He said he’s spoken to Senate President Chuck Schumer and Sen. Patrick Leahy, who chairs the Appropriations Committee, about the importance of integrating Native issues into every committee.

“I think my main purpose, in addition to passing legislation through the committee and getting money for Native communities is to make sure that whether we’re doing broadband or defense policy or climate policy or the Violence Against Women Act, that Native voices are at the table every time and that when people think about so-called Indian country, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians, that it’s not an afterthought,” he said.

“We have trust and treaty responsibilities and we have to start making good on those responsibilities. And that means that the jurisdiction can’t be defined, siloed into just my committee. So part of my job is to every day prevent members from ignoring the needs of Native people.”

### **More Representation Needed**

Before the American Rescue Plan was passed in March, Schatz met with Biden in the Oval Office and told the president about the bill and his plan to vastly increase funding for Indigenous communities.

Afterward, the president pulled Schatz aside to say he understood and learned through his campaign the injustices faced by Native communities, the senator recounted.

“It was a very Joe Biden moment, because even though we were both masked, he kind of got close to me and that’s shoulder to shoulder, you know, looking me dead in the eye,” he said. “And I’ll never forget it because I felt that this was not just a sort of political constituency to service, but something that he felt right in his gut.”

But Schatz said Pacific Islander representation in the Biden administration is “lacking” even as he acknowledged the historic diversity of the Biden Cabinet.

Biden recently appointed Krystal Ka’ai, who is Native Hawaiian, to lead a White House initiative for Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities, but Asian American Pacific Islander appointees have largely been Asian American.

Schatz has been pressing White House officials to increase Pacific Islander representation and understand that the AAPI community is not a monolith.

“The Asian American Pacific Islander category is such a big basket as to almost be not a particularly useful way to understand representation,” Schatz said. The category is so broad that Pacific Islanders may not feel represented by someone who is of East Asian or South Asian descent, he added.

Representation is just one way to get to Schatz’s larger goal, which he described as a lifetime effort.

“Over time, brick by brick, we’re going to try to reverse the damage and reverse the scars,” he said.

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