

Senate Resoundingly Passes Bill to Target Anti-Asian Hate Crimes

The bipartisan vote was the first legislative action either chamber of Congress has taken to bolster law enforcement's response to rising attacks on the Asian-American community.



By Catie Edmondson

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WASHINGTON — The Senate overwhelmingly approved legislation on Thursday aimed at strengthening federal efforts to address hate crimes directed at Asian-Americans amid a sharp increase in discrimination and violence against Asian communities in the United States.

The bipartisan vote, 94 to 1, was the first legislative action either chamber of Congress has taken to bolster law enforcement's response to attacks on people of Asian descent, which have intensified during the coronavirus pandemic.

“By passing this bill, the Senate makes it very clear that hate and discrimination against any group has no place in America,” said Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York and the majority leader. “By passing this bill, we say to the Asian-American community that their government is paying attention to them, has heard their concerns and will respond to protect them.”

The measure, sponsored by Senator Mazie Hirono, Democrat of Hawaii, would establish a position at the Justice Department to expedite the agency's review of hate crimes and expand the channels to report them. It would also encourage the creation of state-run hate crime hotlines, provide grant money to law enforcement agencies that train their officers to identify hate crimes and introduce a series of public education campaigns around bias against people of Asian descent.

The legislation will next go to the House, where lawmakers passed a resolution last year condemning anti-Asian discrimination related to the pandemic. Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California pledged on Thursday shortly after the bill's passage to put it to a vote on the House floor next month, calling it a catalyst for “robust, impactful action.”

“I cannot tell you how important this bill is” to the Asian-American community, “who have often have felt very invisible in our country; always seen as foreign, always seen as the other” said Ms. Hirono, the first Asian-American woman elected to the chamber and one of only two currently serving there. “We stand with you and will continue to stand with you to prevent these kinds of crimes from happening our country.”

The legislation marshaled a level of support rarely seen in the bitterly divided Congress — even on issues as straightforward as addressing a spate of racially motivated crimes. The lopsided vote reflected the will in both parties to respond to the rash of violence against Asian-Americans, and a determination among rank-and-file senators to show that they could work across partisan lines to reach consensus on legislation and steer clear of a filibuster.

Republicans had initially offered a lukewarm response to the bill. But they rallied around an amended version after Ms. Hirono worked behind the scenes with Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, to secure enough Republican support to win 60 votes. That included adding a section explicitly documenting and denouncing attacks against Asian-Americans, as well as the provision establishing the hate crime hotlines, proposed by Senators Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, and Jerry Moran, Republican of Kansas.

Ms. Collins took to the Senate floor on Thursday to urge her colleagues to support the legislation, calling on them to join her in sending “an unmistakably strong signal that crimes targeting Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders in our country will not be tolerated.”

Citing those revisions, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, said he would reverse his position on the measure and support it. Language in the original bill did not once refer to the Asian-American community but instead mentioned victims of “Covid-19 hate crimes,” Mr. Cotton said, adding that an earlier provision directed federal agencies to issue guidance

advising what kind of terms to use in describing the pandemic, a move he said was too prescriptive.

Senator Josh Hawley, Republican of Missouri, was the lone opponent of the legislation, arguing that it mandated an overly expansive collection of data around hate crimes that could slide into government overreach.

Democrats defeated a roster of amendments proposed by Republicans, including one aimed at banning federal funds for universities that discriminate against Asian-Americans — something that is already unlawful. Another would have required a report on how the government had enforced restrictions on gatherings for religious worship during the pandemic, and a third would have prohibited the Justice Department from tracking cases of discrimination that did not rise to the level of a crime. Ms. Hirono dismissed the amendments as “damaging” and partisan.

Legislative efforts and debates around the spike of violence targeting Asian-Americans have not always proceeded with such bipartisan comity. In sometimes heated exchanges, some Democratic lawmakers have accused Republicans of supporting and echoing President Donald J. Trump’s racist talk around the pandemic, including calling the coronavirus “Kung Flu.” Republicans, in turn, have accused Democrats of engaging in overreaching political correctness, and said that they are more interested in attacking rhetoric than in addressing violence.

A Rise in Anti-Asian Attacks

A torrent of hate and violence against people of Asian descent around the United States began last spring, in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

- **Background:** Community leaders say the bigotry was fueled by President Donald J. Trump, who frequently used racist language like “Chinese virus” to refer to the coronavirus.
- **Data:** The New York Times, using media reports from across the country to capture a sense of the rising tide of anti-Asian bias, found more than 110 episodes since March 2020 in which there was clear evidence of race-based hate.
- **Underreported Hate Crimes:** The tally may be only a sliver of the violence and harassment given the general undercounting of hate crimes, but the broad survey captures the episodes of violence across the country that grew in number amid Mr.

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After Representative Chip Roy of Texas, one of the top Republicans on the Judiciary Committee, used his introductory remarks at a hearing in March on anti-Asian discrimination to issue a lengthy condemnation of the Chinese government’s handling of the coronavirus and asserted that Democrats were “policing” free speech, he was met with fiery blowback.

“Your president, and your party, and your colleagues can talk about issues with any other country that you want, but you don’t have to do it by putting a bull’s-eye on the back of Asian-Americans across this country, on our grandparents, on our kids,” said Representative Grace Meng, Democrat of New York.

“This hearing was to address the hurt and pain of our community, to find solutions,” she added, “and we will not let you take our voice away from us.”

Experts testifying before the panel told lawmakers that such language had contributed to an atmosphere of increased animus against Asian-Americans. Attacks targeting Asian-Americans — many of them women or older people — have increased nearly 150 percent in the past year, the experts said.