RALEIGH, N.C. — Republican lawmakers in North Carolina are pushing forward with their plan to repeal a pandemic-era law that allowed the wearing of masks in public for health reasons, a move spurred in part by demonstrations against the war in Gaza that have included masked protesters camped out on college campuses.

The legislation cleared the Senate on Wednesday in a 30-15 vote along party lines despite several attempts by state Senate Democrats to change the bill. The bill, which would raise penalties for someone who wears a mask while committing a crime, including arrested protesters, could still be altered as it heads back to the House.

Opponents of the bill say it risks the health of those masking for safety reasons. But those backing the legislation say it is a needed response to the demonstrations, including those at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that escalated to police clashes and arrests. The bill also further criminalizes the blockage of roads or emergency vehicles for a protest, which has occurred during pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Raleigh and Durham.

“It's about time that the craziness is put, at least slowed down, if not put to a stop,” Wilson County Republican Sen. Buck Newton, who presented the bill, said on the Senate floor Wednesday.

Most of the pushback against the bill has centered around its removal of health and safety exemptions for wearing a mask in public. The [*health exemption was added*](https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2019/sb232) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic along largely bipartisan lines.

This strikethrough would return public masking rules to their pre-pandemic form, which were created in 1953 to address a different issue: limiting Ku Klux Klan activity in North Carolina, according to a [*2012 book*](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/klansville-usa-9780199391165?cc=us&lang=en&) by Washington University in St. Louis sociology professor David Cunningham.

Since the pandemic, masks have become a partisan flashpoint — and Senate debate on if the law would make it illegal to mask for health purposes was no different.

Democratic lawmakers repeated their unease about how removing protections for people who choose to mask for their health could put immunocompromised North Carolinians at risk of breaking the law. Legislative staff said during a [*Tuesday committee*](https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-covid-masks-gaza-protest-b0c6ea89a5d08a8d2f2b21e793e8a6d7) that masking for health purposes would violate the law.

“You're making careful people into criminals with this bill,” Democratic Sen. Natasha Marcus of Mecklenburg County said on the Senate floor. “It's a bad law.”

Simone Hetherington, an immunocompromised person who spoke during Wednesday's Senate Rules Committee, said masking is one of the only ways she can protect herself from illnesses and fears the law would prevent that practice.

“We live in different times and I do receive harassment,” Hetherington said about her mask wearing. “It only takes one bad actor.”

But Republican legislators continued to express doubt that someone would get in legal trouble for masking because of health concerns, saying law enforcement and prosecutors would use discretion on whether to charge someone. Newton said the bill focuses on criminalizing masks only for the purpose of concealing one's identity.

“I smell ***politics*** on the other side of the aisle when they're scaring people to death about a bill that is only going to criminalize people who are trying to hide their identity so they can do something wrong,” Newton said.

Three Senate Democrats proposed amendments to keep the health exemption and exclude hate groups from masking, but Senate Republicans used a procedural mechanism to block them without going up for a vote.

Future changes to the bill could be a possibility, but it would ultimately be up to the House, Newton told reporters after the vote. Robeson County Republican Sen. Danny Britt also said during an earlier committee that he anticipated “some tweaking."

House Rules Committee Chairman Destin Hall, a Caldwell County House Republican, told reporters before the Senate vote that the House planned to “take a look at it" but members wanted to clamp down on people who wear masks while committing crimes.

The masking bill will likely move through a few committees before hitting the House floor, which could take one or two weeks, Hall said.