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OPINION

Time to get rid of sheriffs in California

Joe Mathews Jan. 27, 2019

Then-Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson, who wrongly tied officer's killing to the state's sanctuary law, meets with President in May. Photo: White House video 2018



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Trump



Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca during a tour of the Men's Central Jail in Los Angeles. The Sheriff's Department had been accused of hiding details of deputy assaults on inmates, but also had to scrap a questionable program where official-looking badges were given to local civic leaders. Photo: Damian Dovarganes / Associated Press 2004

Former Orange County Sheriff Mike Carona speaks at a news conference outside court after he was acquitted in 2009. In 2011, he became a convicted felon. Photo: Nick Ut / Associated Press 2009



The county sheriff is the problem child among California elected officials. No office is less accountable or more reliable in producing scandal.

Once elected, sheriffs in all 58 counties have power over jails and policing, and act pretty much as they please. Under our state's structure, a sheriff in California can't really be fired. Those most liable to complain about a sheriff — inmates and those accused of crimes — have trouble gaining the public's ear, let alone its sympathy. And in the Trump era, some sheriffs, especially in conservative precincts, have flirted with anti-California treason, defying state laws that protect our immigrant families.

"The power of sheriffs," historian Andrew Isenberg has written, "is inextricably tied up in the concept of a popular justice that is not bound by anything so mundane as the law."

In theory, sheriffs should be accountable precisely because they are elected. The California Constitution requires every county to have an elected sheriff for that reason. But in practice, sheriffs' elections are not

Questioned about these moves, Villanueva's response was classic California sheriff: "The state Constitution lays out that the oversight of the sheriff is the voters." In other words, you must wait four years before you can stop me, no matter what I do.

There is another solution. Voters should change the Constitution — protecting ourselves by writing the elected sheriff out of it.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at SFChronicle.com/letters.



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