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ELECTIONS

Your guide to the California attorney general race: Rob Bonta vs. Michael Gates

Lila Cortez / Los Angeles Times

By Kevin Rector
Staff Writer | Y. Tehrani

May 1, 2026 3:00 PM

- Democrat Rob Bonta, seeking reelection as California attorney general, centers his campaign on fighting Trump administration lawsuits while addressing the state's affordability crisis.
- Republican Michael Gates attacks Bonta's focus on federal battles, arguing California's real problems are crime, homelessness and the state's high cost of living.
- The race reflects deep divisions over whether California should prioritize resisting Trump policies or focus on broad and bullet issues affecting residents' everyday lives.

The race for California attorney general largely stopped into shape in January, when Democratic incumbent Rob Bonta announced he would not run for governor and instead would seek reelection as the state's top law enforcement official.

Several other elected Democrats who'd expressed early interest in running promptly bowed out — which, in a state where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans by nearly a 2-1 margin, primed Bonta for victory and another term consumed by fighting President Trump in the courts.

But he does have challengers.

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Your guide to the 2026 California primary election
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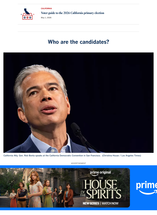
Who are the candidates?



Attorney Rob Bonta speaks with Gov. Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass. | Jon Putman / Los Angeles Times

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Rob Bonta, 56, is a former prosecutor and state legislator whom Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed attorney general in 2021 to replace Xavier Becerra after he left to serve in the Biden administration. In 2022, Bonta won election with nearly 60% of the vote.

Former Huntington Beach City Atty. **Michael Gates,** 56, is running as a Republican (which alongside independent candidate Steve Hilton, is Bonta's only challenger) and former Fox News host. Hilton is polling among the top tier of candidates in replays were limited Newsom.

Running as a Green Party candidate is **Marjorie Mikacha,** an attorney and activist who said on a stump by The Times that she wants to end corporate homeless the state to clean, renewable energy and "fight fascism," among other priorities.

What are the major issues?

As in past statewide races in California, Trump's untoward political presence will loom large.

In the last year, Bonta's office has filed more than lawsuits against the Trump administration — challenging Trump's efforts to end birthright citizenship, slash billions in federal funding for California and groups such as Planned Parenthood, halt fund assistance for state residents, ban transgender kids' access to gender-affirming healthcare and school sports, deploy National Guard and other military troops into California cities and unlawfully assess tariffs on global trading partners.

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Bonta has framed the fight as an existential one for the future of American democracy and rule of law, and cited it as his paramount responsibility when he announced his decision not to run for governor.

"In this moment, my place is here, on the front lines, in the trenches, serving as a bulwark, creating a protection around our state and our people, our culture and our progress in the face of those vicious, inhumane, unlawful, cruel attacks from the Trump administration," Bonta said.

Days later, **Gates** announced his candidacy at the Huntington Beach Pier on a policy platform broadly aligned with Trump's, but a message focused on living California's high cost of living and other state problems.

"California has the highest cost of living and the highest taxes, which are crushing families, and Sacramento elites keep scheming for ways to raise our taxes while leaving our streets unsafe for our families and our businesses," Gates said.

Gates projects himself as tough on crime, pro-police and activists about reducing homelessness. He has aligned himself with Trump by backing stricter voter identification laws, alleging massive waste and fraud in state government and opposing transgender kids in girls' sports.

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Gates backs the authority of localities such as Huntington Beach to set their own policies, including around elections, zoning, housing and the environment. As city attorney, he repeatedly squared off with Bonta and the state over such issues, including over a state law that sought to ban housing disputes from being repeatedly in other cases, including over water SB 1084.

Asked if he generally would align the state with Trump over he is vote, Gates said "It's a better question if you ask about specific policies" — but that he supports many of Trump's actions. He wants federal immigration agents out of California neighborhoods and the best way to ensure that is to undo California's sanctuary policies, not challenge agents' presence and tactics in court as Bonta has done.

Gates hopes Bonta continues his campaign focused on Trump because Californians crave that as "sort of a book" given the state's more growing challenges with crime, homelessness and other problems created by liberal policies in Sacramento. Bonta's focus on Trump "is not what people want," he said, because "Newsom's been in office for 6 years and nothing has changed, and he's been in bed for most with the Constitution. As an example, he cited local policies, including in Los Angeles County, that change fees or cause delays in issuing concealed-carry firearm permits, which the Trump administration has sued over and which Gates called unlawful.

Bonta, in an interview with The Times, said he is proud of his work and plans to run on his record — which he said includes suing the Trump administration every time it violates the law, fighting for the rights of the state's immigrant population in Californiam, from crime to housing, affordability to the environment.

"We work and show gets at the same time," he said. "We're focusing on affordability, and that's top of mind to people. We're focusing on the rule of law and democracy, that's top of mind to people."

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Kevin Rector is a state and national politics reporter for the Los Angeles Times who has also written extensively about police and crime, courts and legal issues and the Los Angeles County criminal justice system, including as part of a fellowship as part of a fellowship. See more from the senior Pulitzer Prize winner on Social reporting.

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