Memo Re the March 5, 2024 Primary Election Results Reporting Robin Stone President, Elections Commission March 20, 2024 Regular Meeting

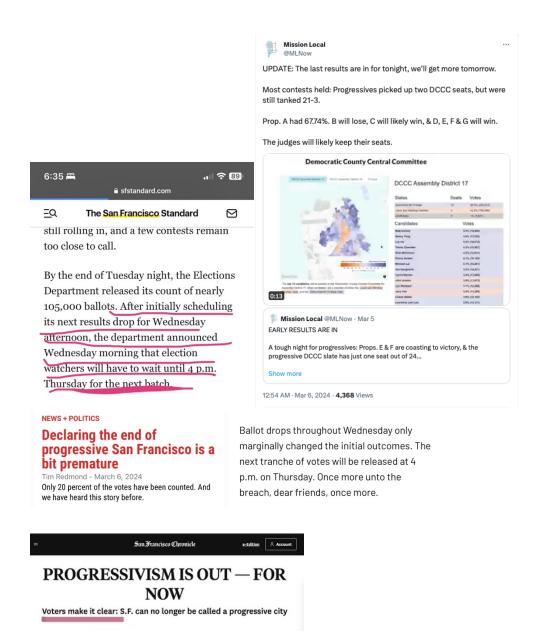
## **Background**

In 2021, California passed a law permanently requiring vote-by-mail (VBM) ballots to be sent to every registered voter. In every election since then, ~90% of San Francisco voters have chosen to cast their ballots by mail (VBM) over a physical polling location. With longer lead times and processing requirements, the uptick in VBM has considerable implications for election results reporting. The issue is not unique to San Francisco; as of Tuesday, March 19, 2024, 166K ballots remain uncounted and a dozen races remain too close to call across the entire state of California – a full two weeks after election day.

## March 5, 2024 Primary Election

During and ahead of elections, the San Francisco Department of Elections provides <u>a robust and transparent reporting schedule on their website</u>, in addition to publishing daily press releases with preliminary results and estimated outstanding ballots to be counted. Importantly, the first batch of results reported on election night only encompass in-person voting and VBM ballots received *prior* to election day. On the March 5 Primary Election night, the Department still had to count more than 50% of total ballots cast, however several local news outlets began calling races, making determinations about election outcomes, and inaccurately covering the results reporting schedule.

Here is a brief snapshot of inaccuracies reported by local news outlets within the first 48-hours of election day:



## **Looking Ahead**

With growing concerns about disruptions to November's Presidential Election, and the certainty of San Francisco's November ballot significantly outsizing the March primary (see Memo Regarding AB1416), it is imperative that the media is prepared to properly educate the public with accurate election information.

Ahead of the Commission's regular meeting, I briefed Director Arntz on my concerns regarding the news reports and asked him to share some context about the Department's communications planning process ahead of elections. I'd like this memo and conversation to jumpstart longer-range planning ahead of November.