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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 27, 2020

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DEMOCRATIC PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES PROPOSE NEW VOTING RIGHTS ACT, LEGALIZING MARIJUANA, NATIONAL REFERENDUMS ON MAJOR ISSUES, EXECUTIVE ORDERS AND OTHER MEASURES TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

The Campaigns Made Their Pitches to Black Voters at the SCLC Public Policy Conference and Presidential Candidate Forum

COLUMBIA, S.C. – At the SCLC Public Policy Conference and Presidential Candidate Forum, representatives for Democratic presidential candidates recited an array of public policy proposals ranging from a new voting rights act to legalizing pot, holding national referendums and issuing executive orders to help bring racial equity and improve opportunities in communities of color. Surrogates for candidates spoke on Wednesday, February 26 to an enthusiastic crowd of several hundred people at the event, which was sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and held at the Tin Roof Event Center in Columbia. The event included participants representing businessman Tom Steyer, Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, former Vice President Joe Biden and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren. Only former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar didn't participate.

“This was a tremendously important event. Presidential campaigns spoke directly to African Americans about how they would improve our quality of life, create racial equity and provide opportunities for our communities to succeed,” said Dr. Charles Steele, Jr. SCLC’s President and CEO. “The candidates did not disappoint. We heard a variety of plans, promises and proposals that will help black voters in South Carolina, Super Tuesday States and across the country determine which candidates to support.”

Dr. Steele noted that while black voters represent the critical base of the Democratic party, black communities endure significant health disparities, a wealth gap, economic distress and ineffective education for our children. “It’s time for candidates to give comprehensive proposals on how they will address these issues. The SCLC forum presented that platform and we applaud

those who participated. It demonstrates their seriousness in addressing the impact that racial bias has had on our communities.”

Trey Baker, Director of African American Engagement for Vice President Biden, said that, as president, Biden would aggressively use executive orders to counter policies and practices enacted by President Trump.

Noting that Biden would “protect the absolute right to vote,” Baker said Biden would “turn back some of the damage that Donald Trump has done to our government, to our bureaucracy and to the Constitution. He will do this through executive orders.”

Moreover, Baker said that Biden’s history demonstrates that he gets things done. “People are confused,” he said. “Being progressive isn’t so much about being liberal; being progressive is getting things done.” Baker took direct aim at the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision determining that during elections, government cannot restrict independent expenditures by corporations, associations, nonprofits and labor unions. “What Citizens United did was bring all this flow of money into campaigns,” said Baker, adding that Biden would seek a Constitutional Amendment to overturn the ruling.

Speaking for businessman Tom Steyer, who has been making inroads with black voters, his wife, Kat Taylor, expressed strong support for the Voting Rights Act and proclaimed that her husband is a strong supporter of a “national referendum” on issues.

“A national referendum would give Americans a chance to tell Congress what they want,” Taylor said. “It would give Americans countrywide a chance to vote directly on issues of concern to them when Congress fails to act. It is a form of Direct Democracy that 26 states already recognize and would give Americans a chance to tell Congress what they want... Congress is too beholden to corporate interest on (issues like) sensible gun control legislation, comprehensive immigration reform ... things all Americans want but haven’t been able to get for decades.”

The campaign of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, which was represented by Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner, emphasized the need to fix criminal justice as a route towards improving economic justice for people of color.

“When you mess up criminal justice, you mess up economic justice...the two cannot be separated,” Krasner said, citing research by the Brookings Institute demonstrating that people from low-income backgrounds are 30 times more likely to be in jail than high income people. “We know they didn’t commit 30 percent more crimes,” he said, noting the unfairness of the justice system.

Further, Krasner said that “the country is under the control of a shrinking number of incredible wealthy people” who control policy making on voting, healthcare, homeownership, criminal justice and other aspects of life. He cited Sen. Warren’s “plan for economic justice” and said the candidate supports federal standards for elections, and blasted as “cheaters” conservatives who

seek to prevent formerly incarcerated people from voting and are “trying to squash the vote of people more interested in progress.”

South Carolina State Rep. J.A. Moore, who represented former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, maintained that his candidate “is the right person at this time. We need new generational leadership... We need a president who does not just talk and tweet, but has fought for his country honorably... We need a president who will bring integrity, dignity and grace back to the White House and we can be proud to call, “ ‘That’s My President.’ ”

Further, Moore said Buttigieg supports “a 21st Century Voting Rights Act” that will ensure voting rights, including restoring voting privileges for the formerly incarcerated. Moore said the Buttigieg platform makes the \$15 minimum wage just a beginning and includes investment in education, as well as training in automotive, electricians and other trades. “These types of jobs produce livable wages and create opportunities for entrepreneurs, one of the key components for not only building wealth, but generational wealth.” He also called for making college affordable, with a sliding scale of assistance for those who need it.

Combat veteran Joseph Metty, who represented Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, said her platform includes reducing the money spent on endless wars and using it to help the American people. In an emotional moment, Metty broke down in tears as he described the suffering of veterans, some of whom are committing suicide at alarming rates.

“We spent trillions of dollars since 9/11 on unnecessary wars,” Metty said. “Why? When we have communities in our state and across the nation that don’t have drinking water, people in many states who have two and three jobs just to keep the lights on, people who are essentially drafted into military service – it’s not an actual draft, but they can’t afford tuition for college or gas for their car to get to work, so that’s why they enlist.”

Metty said Gabbard supports a single payer healthcare system, but won’t take away choice. “If you have private insurance and you are happy with it, you should keep it,” he said, adding that Gabbard wants the insurance lobby and Big Pharma removed from the negotiating table. He also asserted that the criminal justice system has been “racist” in the way it is applied to African Americans. “Stop throwing people in jail for weed and minor drug violations,” he said, noting that Gabbard will end the prohibition on marijuana. She will work to treat drug addiction as a mental health issue, not a criminal issue. “It is already treated as a mental issue if you are rich.”