

James E. Clyburn

1940–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
DEMOCRAT FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

1993–



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MEMBER

James E. (Jim) Clyburn's 1992 election made him the first African American from South Carolina to serve in Congress since the late 19th century. Representative Clyburn has won re-election to seven additional terms, serving as chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and winning a seat on the influential House Appropriations Committee. On November 16, 2006, the House Democratic Caucus unanimously elected Clyburn Majority Whip, making him the first South Carolinian and the second African American to ascend to the third-ranking position in the House.¹

James E. Clyburn was born in Sumter, South Carolina, on July 21, 1940, the eldest of three sons of Enos L. Clyburn, a minister, and Almeta Clyburn, a beauty shop operator. At age 12, he was elected president of the Sumter youth chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. A client of his mother's once warned him against giving voice to his early political aspirations in the segregated South. "We knew what the rules were. I mean, a 12-year-old black kid talking about being in politics and government?" Clyburn recalled of that formative moment. "She was just telling me, 'Son, be careful, you can't have those kinds of dreams—you're not the right color.'"² He attended Mather Academy, a private all-black high school. Clyburn graduated from South Carolina State College in 1961 with a bachelor of arts degree. During the 1950s and 1960s, he organized sit-ins at an Orangeburg, South Carolina, five and dime store and was arrested and jailed for his participation in nonviolent civil rights protests.³ During one such protest he met his future wife, the former Emily England; they have three grown daughters: Mignon, Angela, and Jennifer. Clyburn taught history in high school before working on several federal employment programs. From 1968 to 1971, he was the executive director of the South Carolina state commission for farm workers. In 1970, Clyburn ran an unsuccessful campaign for the state house of representatives, but his candidacy caught South Carolina Governor John West's attention. He joined Governor West's staff in 1971 and, three years later, was appointed head of the state commission for human affairs (the first black gubernatorial appointee in the state in more than seven decades). Clyburn lost campaigns for South Carolina secretary of state in 1978 and 1986.⁴

In 1992, at the recommendation of the U.S. Justice Department, statewide redistricting created a majority-black district in eastern South Carolina. It was a sprawling district encompassing all or part of 16 counties as well as parts of the cities of Charleston, Columbia, and Florence. The five-term incumbent Democrat, Robert (Robin) Tallon, retired, and Clyburn captured the Democratic nomination with 56 percent of the primary vote against four opponents. In the general election, he easily defeated Republican candidate John Chase with 65 percent of the vote.⁵ Clyburn is a distant relative of George Washington Murray, the last African American to represent South Carolina in the U.S. House (1893–1895, 1896–1897).⁶ In his subsequent seven re-election campaigns, Clyburn won with between 64 and 73 percent of the vote. In 2006, he defeated Republican Gary McLeod with a 64 percent majority.⁷

As a new Representative, Clyburn proved to be a pragmatic, enthusiastic, and effective behind-the-scenes player, moving rapidly into the leadership ranks.⁸ Elected co-president of the Democratic freshman class, he won assignments on the Public Works and Transportation Committee (later named Transportation and Infrastructure) and the Veterans' Affairs Committee. He later served as Ranking Member of the Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation. He accepted an additional assignment with the Small Business Committee for a term in the 104th Congress (1995–1997). In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Representative Clyburn won a seat on the exclusive Appropriations Committee.⁹ He has served on that panel since. The CBC also unanimously chose Clyburn as its chairman in that Congress, making him just the second southerner to lead the group.¹⁰ At the start of the 108th Congress (2003–2005), Clyburn's Democratic colleagues elected him Vice Chairman of the Democratic Caucus. He served in that post until he was elected Chairman of the Democratic Caucus during the 109th Congress (2005–2007).

As a Member of the House, Representative Clyburn has focused on issues important to his agricultural and low income district and the African-American community generally. He has been a strong supporter of education, seeking increased federal funding for historically black colleges in his district. He opposed efforts to overhaul the Social Security system and to dismantle affirmative action programs and has advocated a higher minimum wage and universal health care coverage. "There is no separation between the defense of our nation and the nutrition for our children," Clyburn once said. "There is no difference between the defense of our nation and a strong, educated work force."¹¹

FOR FURTHER READING

Clyburn, James with Jennifer Revels. *Uncommon Courage: The Story of Briggs v. Elliott, South Carolina's Unsung Civil Rights Battle* (Spartanburg, SC: Palmetto Conservation Foundation Press, 2004).

"Clyburn, James Enos," *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000537>.

NOTES

- 1 "James E. Clyburn Biography," <http://clyburn.house.gov/clyburn-biography.cfm> (accessed 27 November 2007).
- 2 Betsy Rothstein, "Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.); Head of Congressional Black Caucus Grew Up in a Segregated World," 17 February 1999, *The Hill*: 15.
- 3 Matthew C. Quinn, "Gephardt's Man in S. Carolina; Can Clyburn Turn Out the Vote in Primary?" 10 December 2003, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: 6A.
- 4 Rothstein, "Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.); *Politics in America*, 2006 (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 931.
- 5 "James Clyburn," *Gale Newsmakers* (Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 1999); *Politics in America*, 2006: 931.
- 6 Steve Piacente, "Jim Clyburn: The 6th District Congressman Built His Career on Lessons Learned Early in Life," 27 February 1999, *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC): D1; *Politics in America*, 2006: 931.
- 7 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.
- 8 Stephen Delaney Hale, "Freshman Congressman Upbeat," 28 January 1993, *Augusta Chronicle* (Georgia): SC1.
- 9 Steve Piacente, "Rep. Clyburn Wins Seat on Appropriations Panel," 11 December 1998, *Post and Courier* (Charleston, SC): A1.
- 10 Mickey Leland of Texas was the first, serving from 1985 to 1987. See Appendix I, Congressional Black Caucus Chairmen and Chairwomen, 1971–2007.
- 11 Piacente, "Jim Clyburn."