

James Clyburn says supporting Clarence Thomas for supreme court ‘was mistake’

Congressman says Thomas abandoned his principles to become an extremist, hard-right member of bench

[*Richard Luscombe*](#) 2026

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<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/aug/31/james-clyburn-clarence-thomas-supreme-court>

The senior Democratic congressman James [Clyburn](#) said his decision to support [Clarence Thomas](#) for a US supreme court seat “was a mistake” and called for the expansion of the nation’s highest legal panel to 13 justices.

Clyburn, of South Carolina, spoke up for Thomas at his [fiery 1991 confirmation hearings](#), calling him “a personal and professional friend” who would use their shared experiences lifting minorities and advancing civil rights to become a respected and accomplished jurist.

Instead, Clyburn told NBC’s Meet the Press on Sunday, Thomas abandoned his principles to become an extremist, hard-right member of a bench that has delivered some stunning legal reversals in recent years, including the [overturning](#) of federal protections for abortion and [ending affirmative action](#) in higher education.

Asked by host Kristen Welker if he regretted standing up for Thomas, Clyburn replied: “I have made mistakes in my life, and that’s one that I made. And I will own up to that mistake.

“I had no idea that [Clarence Thomas](#) would rebel the way he has against his own background and experiences. He was raised by his grandfather, and he has shown very little sensitivity to the environment his grandfather grew up down in Pin Point, Georgia.”

Before joining Congress in 1993, Clyburn was South Carolina’s human affairs commissioner for 18 years beginning in 1974. He said Thomas’s tenure as chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 1982 until 1990, a time in which it vigorously pursued anti-discrimination legal actions, had assured him that Thomas “believed in precedents, the law”.



Representative James Clyburn: ‘I had no idea that Clarence Thomas would rebel the way he has against his own background and experiences.’ Photograph: Matt Kelley/AP

He told Welker: “I had faith and confidence in the fact that his background and experiences would instruct him in his professionalism, especially sitting on the bench. I thought, sure, that he would be here upholding those precedents set down in 1954 in the *Brown v Board of Education* decision” that declared racial segregation in public schools was illegal.

But Thomas, whose later years on the bench have been mired in [allegations of corruption](#), turned his back on civil rights, Clyburn suggested, notably in the [2024 decision](#) on ideological grounds that ruled affirmative action in college admissions unconstitutional.

“That was a mistake on my part,” Clyburn said of his past support for Thomas. “And I own up to it.”

Clyburn spoke as the prospect of increasing the number of [US supreme court](#) justices, a popular rallying cry for sections of the Democratic party as it attempts to retake the House in November's midterms, returned to public discourse.

Former Democratic vice-president Kamala Harris in July [called](#) for the expansion of the bench from nine to 13, a proposal Clyburn said he would support.

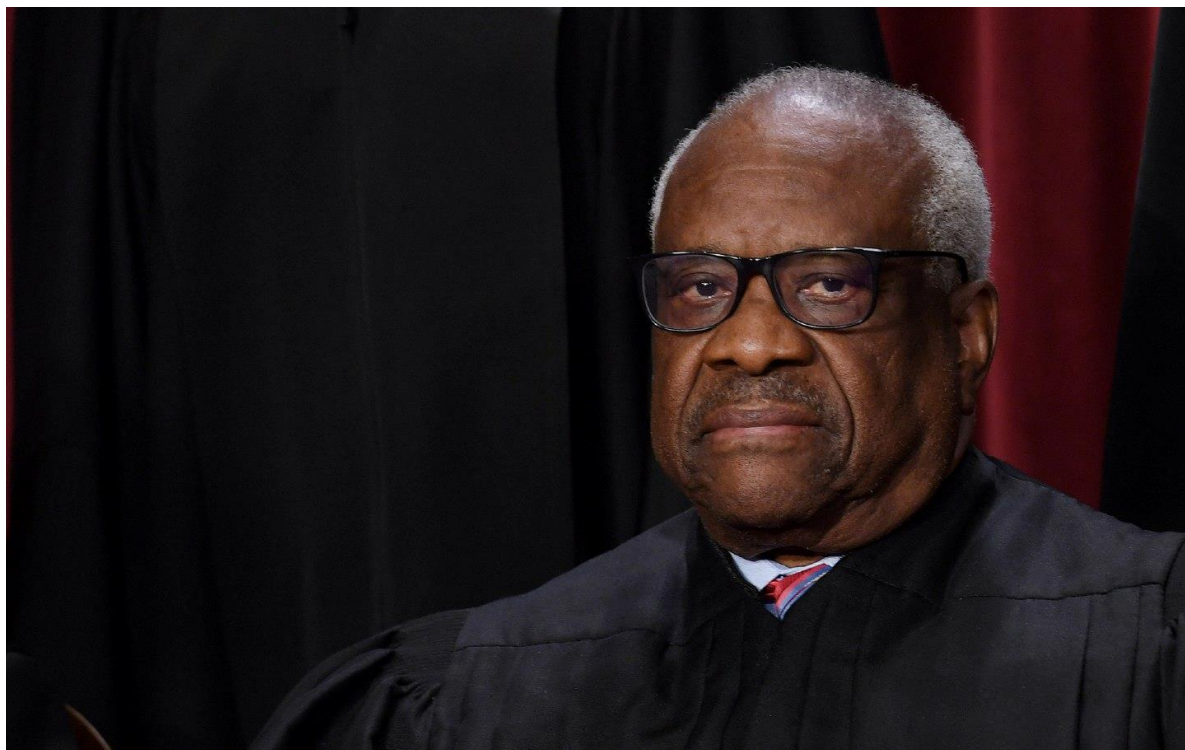
"Thirteen is a pretty good number," he said. "A baker's dozen would be a good number to have on the court.

"And I would hope we would get people on the court who will follow the constitutional underpinnings of this great nation of ours. I had hoped that Clarence Thomas would follow the underpinnings of that constitution of ours, but he has not done so.

"In fact, he's decided to go all the way from an angry leftist, to a very angry rightist."

Clyburn, however, said Democrats' immediate priorities after November should not be either supreme court expansion or impeachment of Donald Trump for what would be a third time across his two presidencies.

"If the Democrats were to take back the House, and I feel confident that we will, our first order of business ought to be developing an accessible and affordable campaign effort that will yield what I will call making this country, its greatness, accessible and affordable for all of its citizens," he said.



Clarence Thomas