# POLITICAL PULSE

## Gurus Jennings, Tarlov to Deliver Insights

**By Matt Ottinger**

The Indiana Chamber of Commerce's 37th Annual Awards Dinner on November 5 at the JW Marriott Indianapolis will bring together two national political voices who know what it's like to stand their ground – often while outnumbered – in some of television's most spirited conversations.

Scott Jennings is a prominent political commentator for CNN and a nationally recognized Republican strategist. He previously served as special assistant to President George W. Bush and deputy director of political affairs at the White House, following senior roles on multiple presidential and U.S. Senate campaigns. Jessica Tarlov is a political strategist and co-host of *The Five* on Fox News, where she serves as a leading Democratic voice. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from the London School of Economics and has worked in political research and strategy in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

*BizVoice*® asked each a series of questions about their thoughts and experiences, and what they intend to discuss in November. (Answers have been edited for space.)



Kentucky native and resident Scott Jennings is quite familiar with Indiana and has an extensive background as a Republican political pro in addition to his role as a public relations executive.

***BizVoice*: What drew you to the political world and being a staunch supporter of your party?**

**Scott Jennings:** "I grew up in a somewhat political, but very Democratic family in western Kentucky, and so I learned about politics early. But I didn't really come to the Republicans until I was a teenager. I was in high school when the Gingrich Republican Revolution of '94 took place. I recall being very attracted to that and those ideas and those candidates … so I have not been a Republican my whole life, which somewhat shocked my family when I did that. But I'm happy to report that since then they've all come around and they're Republicans now, too. It's interesting; I think our evolution there in western Kentucky quite mirrors the evolution of a lot of Democrats in rural America. They've all basically become Republicans these days."

**Jessica Tarlov:** "I grew up in an uber political household. I've always just found it fascinating. I had very politically active parents, especially through the Vietnam War era. My dad was arrested for protesting. My mom wasn't, which if you met them, you'd be surprised that it was that way. I would've expected my mother to have definitely been the one to get arrested.

"But it's kind of always been in the blood and the juice of my family growing up. It really crystallized for me in graduate school. I did a Ph.D. in political science where I looked at the effects of scandal on politicians' re-election rates and became really fascinated by what it is that a politician could do or say and the effect that it would have on their political career."

**BV: Indiana is often seen as a reliably Republican state, but it can still reflect important voter attitudes. What do you think Indiana tells us about the broader political mood in the country right now?**

**SJ:** "Interestingly, you all had an intramural squabble over redistricting this year that was somewhat instructive about (President) Trump's influence over the party. Obviously, some of the legislators didn't want to do redistricting and Trump did, and that manifested itself in a bunch of people (six) losing primaries. So, I think one of the things we've learned in Indiana this year is President Trump's influence in the Republican Party is vast, and it even reaches into local and state legislative politics around the country. And some people learn that lesson the hard way.

"I think there are people who have different views about when and how to do redistricting, but to me, that's a separate question than, 'Okay, when Donald Trump gets involved in something, what do people normally do?' And these days in the Republican Party, people normally want to do what the President wants to do."

**JT:** "What is particularly interesting about (Indiana) right now is I feel like it's a ground zero for the continued tussle between MAGA Republicans and old school Republicans, like Pence Republicans. I actually talked about Indiana a lot on air on *The Five* over the redistricting fight when so many members of the state Legislature bucked President Trump and said they wouldn't support it. And then he swooped in and primaried out (most of those) who went against him.

"So right now I think the big story on the right is the civil war within the party and the majority have shifted over in Trump's direction, but Indiana has definitely caught my attention as a place where Republicans with the values of Mike Pence are still there and are still in office. And I'm sure are also very much reflected in the electorate who haven't been necessarily given the kind of options on the ballot that they might like."

**BV: You serve as the political minority voice on your networks. How does that role shape the way you communicate and respond on air?**

**SJ:** "I show up every day knowing I'm going to be yelled at and opposed by four or five people at the same time. So, for me, that means I have to be the most prepared person in the room and I have to do the most active listening. … I have to show up with something original and constructive and worthy every single day. And the way I do that is to be prepared and to engage in active listening, which is a skill that's in short supply on television most days."

**JT:** "It has totally changed the way I think about politics in general … I've learned so much about the opposition, especially. … (So), having the opportunity to not only hear the opinions and the arguments of people who are genuinely enthusiastic about Donald Trump and the Republican Party but (also) get to know them as people and their families, their backstories, how they came to their belief, has been really illuminating. I try to take those perspectives and bring them to more liberal audiences, which I think has really helped folks who listen to *Raging Moderates*, my podcast I have with Scott Galloway, or anytime I go and speak at a conference, for instance.

"I've also realized I identify as a moderate person anyway, but I can see the veracity of my colleagues' arguments about how far left the party has moved when I do go to these conferences and I meet the activist class."

**BV: What have you learned about persuading – or at least productively engaging – people who strongly disagree with you politically?**

**SJ:** "If you watch what I do, a lot of it is centered around just being the only person out there who's willing to listen … and I'm perpetually shocked at the number of people who are sort of surprised when someone actually listens to what they said and asks them a question about it. Most things said on television – even the most outrageous or non-factual assertions go unchecked and unquestioned – and I'm just not willing to do that. So, if I've learned anything, it's that listening and being the one person who's willing to ask a good, incisive question can often be the difference between winning and losing a debate."

**JT:** "I get this question a lot and I have a book coming out in September that's about this called *I Disagree: Winning Arguments Without Losing Friends*. People always want to know about persuading or changing minds, but I really think of what I do and my job as opening minds and giving people who might think differently than me the opportunity to see someone who's modeling civic discourse they can tolerate and enjoy on some days."



Fox News co-host Jessica Tarlov is often found outnumbered but not outpunched on *The Five*. She's optimistic about Democrats' chances to change the political landscape in November.

**BV: Viewers see the debate on camera, but not what happens before or after. What might surprise people about the behind-the-scenes dynamics of political television?**

**SJ:** "Many of us actually have very friendly relationships. I'll just tell you, my two best friends at the network are David Axelrod and Van Jones. And when I tell people that, they're often surprised. But we spend a lot of time together, and Van and I especially spend a lot of time on the road together. We do a lot of public speaking together, and I view them both as good faith operators. They're good faith debaters, they're smart, they listen and they have experience. I learn a lot from them when they're making their arguments – how they handle issues. I learn a lot from them about how I think the American left is approaching a political campaign or some policy debate.

But I think a lot of people are surprised to learn that a country mouse and a city mouse – or a liberal and a conservative – can find a relationship that's meaningful and productive outside of what we're normally doing, and that's opposing each other on television and in public."

**JT:** "Well, my colleagues don't hate me; they actually like me. So, that sometimes surprises people, especially if they only see a clip of a segment and it seems particularly charged or aggressive. It's a strange work environment, but it's a work environment. I think that's something that is jarring to people because we're talking about such hot-button issues and you think I would never go to the water cooler to talk about that. How could they possibly still all get along? But they do. On *The Five*, we always say this when we're doing interviews, that you should take a look at what we're talking about during commercial breaks to really understand what the show is, and who we are as people and how we interact with one another."

**BV: With only a few months to go until the midterms, what most has your attention? Are potential outcomes or scenarios becoming clearer?**

**SJ:** "I don't think it's clear at all, actually. I think the Republicans have a slight advantage to hold the Senate, maybe a little more than slight. And I think I'm closer to 50/50 on the House. I know a lot of analysts are more bullish on Democrats, and I don't dispute that historically the party out of power should do better in a midterm. That's what you would expect to happen. … Certainly Democrats have their advantages here. The Republicans aren't without theirs, and a lot of it revolves around financial resources. And I think in some places, Democrats frankly have nominated candidates who are so far outside the mainstream they may take otherwise competitive districts and put them out of reach.

"How people feel about the economy, how people feel about the cost of living, how people feel about the trajectory of their own life, I think is obviously the most important issue. And even though I think Democrats are describing America as some capitalistic hellscape, I don't know that people necessarily believe that."

**JT:** "As a partisan, I'm feeling good about the midterms. Certainly, on the House side, I feel very strongly that the win has to be (seen as) 'too big to rig' for the Republicans. I think Donald Trump is telegraphing what he wants to do in his (recent) speech talking about how there was Chinese election rigging, even in 2020, and the push for the Save America Act, etc. So, Democrats need to win big. … The Senate is a tougher road for sure … though I'm still optimistic about that."

**Reserve your tickets or table to see Scott Jennings and Jessica Tarlov at the Indiana Chamber's Annual Awards Dinner on November 5: www.indianachamber.com/ad.**


