

Scott Jennings, political analyst and CNN commentator, talks populism at ASU event

By Katelyn Reinhart, ASU News
October 9, 2025

He may have been far from the greenrooms of CNN, but political commentator and analyst Scott Jennings appeared to feel right at home while speaking at Arizona State University's Marston Theater on Oct. 7.

Jennings discussed populism, the current political climate, government transparency and more at "A Revolution in Common Sense: Understanding America's Populist Moment" with Scott Jennings.

Hosted by the [School of Civil and Economic Thought and Leadership](#) as part of its [Civic Discourse Project](#), the event brought ASU students and Valley community members face to face with Jennings, who some audience members see near-daily — through a screen. His lively discussions with CNN political contributors of differing viewpoints regularly go viral.

"It is fun to be here at Arizona State. I'm not used to getting applause when I'm introduced — it's normally four or five people yelling at me," Jennings joked at the beginning of the event.

The audience, a group of both younger and older adults, laughed.

In addition to his more recent work, Jennings has previously served as special assistant to President George W. Bush and has worked on multiple conservative political campaigns.

At ASU, Jennings's talk centered around populism, a way of thinking that can be applied across the political spectrum but generally separates society into two camps: the "common people" and the "elites." He said there has been a rise in populist thinking in recent years, but that populism by itself does not hold the answer to the questions our political decision-makers are facing today.

"Anger is a powerful fuel, but you cannot run a country on it for very long," Jennings said. "'Burn it down' is a great campaign slogan. It's a terrible governing philosophy."

He advocated for what he called “constructive populism” in America, and named three examples of what that may look like. The first: increasing competitiveness in industries such as media, education and social media platforms. The second, Jennings said, is localizing power to smaller governments and rather than the federal government. The third is rebuilding social trust and embracing a shared purpose as American citizens.

“Let me speak directly to the students in here for a moment,” Jennings said. “You are inheriting a weird, weird situation in this country. Trust in institutions is low, record lows. Political divisions, you’re told, are unbridgeable. The economic ladder feels hard to climb. It seems like maybe your American dream will be less than what your parents had. But you also have advantages that nobody else has ever had.”

Jennings encouraged students to seize the moment.

“You can wait for our institutions to reform themselves, or you can simply do it yourself.”

After his lecture, Jennings answered questions from ASU students. The questions ranged widely, from the lecture’s topic, populism, to addressing the second anniversary of the Oct. 7 attack on Israel in 2023. One student asked for advice on how to discuss politics with someone you may disagree with, or who is politically disengaged.

After the Q&A portion concluded, a line wrapped around the stage for audience members to take photos and chat with Jennings.

One of these audience members was Eldon Smith, a resident of the Valley. Smith graduated from ASU with a degree in political science decades ago, but is regularly drawn back to the university for the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership’s events. During Jennings’s lecture, Smith sat in the second row, filling a sheet of paper with notes as Jennings spoke.

“Coming to these events and hearing these speakers, it’s really worthwhile to do,” Smith said after the event concluded. “I had a great education when I was at ASU, but this is really special.”

One of the last few to speak with Jennings after the event, the two posed for a photo. But Smith also wanted to share an insight of his own with Jennings.

In 1975, Smith and his wife traveled in an RV around America to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the United States. The experience was greatly rewarding, Smith said, and offered a great sense of pride in the country he calls home. As the country’s 250th anniversary approaches in July 2026, Smith felt Jennings could use his platform to encourage people to do the same.

“It was a great way to get to know my country, and I think this year is the perfect opportunity for people to go out and do it for themselves,” Smith said.

Did you know the United States is turning 250?

To celebrate, listen to the [Civics in a Year](#) podcast from the [Center for American Civics](#), which is part of the School of Civil and Economic Thought and Leadership. Civics in a Year is a fast-paced podcast series that delivers essential civic knowledge in just 10 minutes per episode. Explore 250

key questions, from the founding documents and branches of government to civil liberties, elections and public participation.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Scott Jennings, CNN conservative political analyst, speaks at Marston Theater on Arizona State University's Tempe campus on Tuesday, Oct. 7. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News