

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Candidate profile: Republican challenger Scott Jensen 01GG86AJ0FMZH7JAZJ22MTJ76K

CATHY WURZER: Just before the news, we heard Brian Bakst's story on Governor Walz's past four years in office. His challenger, Scott Jensen, spent one term in the Minnesota legislature and often vented about how the place operated.

He's now fighting to get back to the capitol as the Republican nominee for governor. Brian Bakst brings us an examination of Jensen's track record.

BRIAN BAKST: It can take many years and many terms for state lawmakers to make their mark at the state capitol. Some don't wait around.

SCOTT JENSEN: 47th district, Scott M. Jensen.

BRIAN BAKST: The lanky Jensen strode to the front of the Senate chamber early in 2017 to deliver his election certificate ahead of his oath. The Chaska Republican found a quicker path to public notice than typical capitol newcomers.

Jensen was just a few weeks into office when then-DFL governor Mark Dayton collapsed during his state of the state address. Jensen was paying close attention to Dayton's heavy breathing, labored voice, and general shakiness, and he was among those quickest to his aid.

SCOTT JENSEN: That was partly why I responded. Now, I think he did. You know, he hit his head. He fainted. And now he's stable.

BRIAN BAKST: The legislature hadn't had a doctor as a member in quite a while. There happened to be two in this freshman class, but Jensen had the advantage of being in the Senate's majority party. His medical background instantly made him a go-to player on health care issues. Despite being a first timer, he was made vice chair of a key health committee.

SCOTT JENSEN: I absolutely expect to have a seat at the table.

BRIAN BAKST: His legislative portfolio reflected it. About 2/3 of the 179 bills Jensen introduced had a health care connection. Nine of them made it into law with the signature of governor Tim Walz, the guy he's trying to beat now as the Republican nominee.

Jensen cultivated a maverick reputation in his one and only term. He sometimes kept allies and adversaries guessing about where he'd come down. It's a contrast to his campaign for governor, where he's taken orthodox GOP stances favoring big tax cuts, school vouchers, and a crackdown on crime. Jensen and Walz weren't always at odds, as these April 2020 comments illustrate.

SCOTT JENSEN: And I would want to thank governor Walz for three or four weeks ago calling me over and asking how he could help to keep this bill moving forward.

BRIAN BAKST: Jensen was offering gratitude as a notable bill he sponsored to cap insulin costs for people in financial distress was on the brink of passage.

SCOTT JENSEN: The bill provides for, if you will, and iron-clad operation whereby no one should fall through the cracks and find themselves desperate.

BRIAN BAKST: It had been a bumpy ride. Supporters of the bill, including then-DFL senator Matt Little, accused Jensen and his party of dragging their feet for almost a year.

MATT LITTLE: It's about time. This bill took far too long to get here for no reason.

BRIAN BAKST: Throughout his Senate term, Jensen was tough to pin down. He signed on to a bill to legalize marijuana, but later said the issue should be decided by voters. He introduced a ranked choice election bill, but then distanced himself from the concept. He worked with lawmakers seeking to restrict conversion therapy for gay children, then voted against that measure, to his own dismay.

SCOTT JENSEN: When I drive home tonight, I'm pretty sure I'll be nauseated all the way.

BRIAN BAKST: And then there are guns. After a Florida school shooting in 2018, Jensen made waves by signing on to bills to toughen gun laws.

SCOTT JENSEN: We're willing to do background checks on Sunday school teachers. When I hire a medical assistant in my clinic, I can do a background check there. But we want to be able to sell guns and handguns and assault rifles and not have background checks because they bought it over the internet or they bought it at a private gun show? That doesn't make sense.

BRIAN BAKST: It drew the ire of gun rights advocates who previously supported him, and it led to an about face when Jensen sought the Republican endorsement for governor. He apologized to convention delegates this May for even considering firearms restrictions.

SCOTT JENSEN: When I was in my first term as a senator, I put myself on the wrong side of the gun issue by thinking I could compel a conversation by putting my name on a bill and removing it six weeks later. That was a mistake, and I'm sorry. And I won't ever do it again.

BRIAN BAKST: As the pandemic hit, Jensen put himself at the front of a crowded candidate field by tapping into conservative angst over COVID-19. He pounded at restrictions imposed by Walz and cast them as an overreaction.

WOMAN: My next guest is a doctor and state senator in Minnesota who is deeply troubled by the CDC's latest guidance for counting COVID deaths.

BRIAN BAKST: Jensen argued COVID death counts were inflated. He doubted the severity of the illness and the merits of and safety of vaccines compared with other treatments. That those views came from a seasoned doctor made Jensen a right wing media regular, but it also opened him up to criticism he was spreading conspiracy theories.

SCOTT JENSEN: I think sometimes science has to breathe, and think we're letting it breathe, whether you like it or not. And as we watch it breathe, we'll see Scott Jensen was right on some things, and Scott Jensen was wrong on some things.

BRIAN BAKST: His medical license came under scrutiny after multiple complaints were lodged, although none resulted in published findings or penalties. Infectious disease doctor Peter Bornstein is among the medical peers to publicly criticized Jensen.

PETER Scott Jensen is a man who put politics before patients and politics before his profession.

BORNSTEIN:

BRIAN BAKST: Jensen frequently touts his 2016 Minnesota Family Doctor of the Year award from the Academy of Family Physicians. The Minnesota Medical Association's political arm recently endorsed Walz. Again, Dr. Bornstein.

PETER I can't recall ever seeing the MedPAC endorse a non-physician over a physician in any race. Sometimes they say

BORNSTEIN: nothing at all, but in this case, to endorse the non-physician over the physician I think speaks volumes.

BRIAN BAKST: But it's another health care issue that's been the main focus of Democratic campaign ads against Jensen, abortion. His position has shifted considerably.

SCOTT JENSEN: I would try to ban abortion. I think that we're basically in a situation where we should be governed by pro-life. There is no reason--

BRIAN BAKST: That was Jensen before winning his party's backing, when asked how he'd approach abortion if the US supreme court nullified *Roe versus Wade*, which it did this summer. Since then, he has softened his rhetoric by calling his prior remark clumsy and said as governor, he couldn't impose a ban if he wanted to.

SCOTT JENSEN: An abortion is a life-saving medical procedure in certain specific given situations. I think we need to remember that. I mean, again, it's got to be about the woman who's pregnant. Her life is, first and foremost, paramount.

BRIAN BAKST: Jensen wasn't the lead sponsor of any abortion bills as a legislator. He was the co-sponsor of one abortion-related bill, and he voted for measures to restrict abortion or further regulate providers. When Jensen announced he was leaving the legislature, he grumbled about a political environment that struck him as toxic and built on party line voting. Here he was in a *TPT Almanac* exit interview.

SCOTT JENSEN: When we disagree, we just go straight to contempt. I mean, we don't just get angry at the other person. We despise them. We demean them. We consider their perspective inferior. This is no way to get it done. Compromise has become a dirty word. If we can't use the word compromise, then at least let's collaborate. If we would collaborate and work together jointly to try to find common ground, and then see if the common ground can't lead to something that gets done.

BRIAN BAKST: There's been even less space for the notion of compromise during the campaign, as Walz and Jensen have hammered one another on TV and in other settings. With their contentious race nearing an end, voters will have to decide whose ideas and tone suits them best. Brian Bakst, MPR news, at the capitol.

CATHY WURZER: And election day, of course, is November the 8th, just two weeks from today. The final debate in the race for governor is coming up Friday at noon right here on MPR news. Governor Walz, Dr. Jensen will meet for an hour to talk about the issues and where they stand. Tune in Friday at noon on air and online. MPR news.