

Can cybersecurity win at the polls? Two candidates think so.

By John Sakellariadis

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Two Democrats running for state and federal office argue that voters are increasingly alarmed about the security implications of artificial intelligence, hacking threats from abroad and Trump's election fraud claims. | Matt York/AP

Cybersecurity isn't typically an issue on which political campaigns are won or lost.

Two Democrats running for state and federal office are betting it will be.

In Georgia, Ashwin Ramaswami has made his background protecting elections for the federal government a centerpiece of his campaign for state Senate. He thinks it is a particularly strong selling point for voters, since his opponent, incumbent Shawn Still, was indicted this January along with former President Donald Trump for interfering with the 2020 election.

And in Oklahoma, Madison Horn, a former cybersecurity executive, believes her background protecting electrical substations and nuclear power facilities against foreign hackers gives her an edge against two-term incumbent [Stephanie Bice](#) (R-Okla.) in an uphill battle for the state's fifth district this November.

Both Horn and Ramaswami face tough battles in red-leaning districts. But each is running on their cyber bonafides. Voters, they argue, are increasingly alarmed about the economic and security implications of artificial intelligence, growing hacking threats from Russia, Iran and China — along with Trump's election fraud claims from 2020.

"We are facing generational challenges that require individuals who understand technology," Horn said in an interview on the sidelines of the RSA cybersecurity conference in San Francisco last week.

The circumstances surrounding Ramaswami's run and, to a lesser extent, that of Horn are, of course, unique. But if they win, they would become two of the first candidates ever to ride a once-niche issue like cybersecurity to victory at the polls.

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[John Sakellariadis]

Ramaswami, 24, and Horn, 34, hope their expertise in cybersecurity will help establish a strong image with voters despite being relative newcomers to politics.

Before entering politics for the race against Still, Ramaswami had a stint in consumer protection at the Georgia attorney general's office and helped support open-source software security programs through a philanthropic tech venture fund run by Eric Schmidt, the former Google CEO. A software engineer, Ramaswami even maintained an open-source JavaScript library in his free time.

But the defining experience of his short career before politics, he hopes, will be his time at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, where he built a tool to help state election officials scan for vulnerabilities on their networks.

Ramaswami said he felt compelled to jump into the race after Still, the incumbent, didn't drop out even though he was accused of seeking to illegally overturn Joe Biden's victory in Georgia in 2020.

"The hackers in cybersecurity are really important," said Ramaswami. "But it's all for nothing if you have politicians who just come in and try to overturn the election results."

In an email, Still argued that he boasts significant private sector and legislative experience on tech issues and has a strong track record with Georgia voters.

He also argued Ramaswami “has zero political or professional experience” and built his campaign on accusations that are false.

“When I get my day in court to prove my innocence and show the country that these false charges against me have no merit, his campaign will disintegrate,” Still wrote.

Horn also has significant cybersecurity credentials. Prior to a 2022 Senate run that ended in defeat to Sen. [James Lankford](#) (R-Okla.), she helped secure substations and nuclear facilities from hackers at Siemens Energy and Critical Fault, a small, Oklahoma City-based security startup.

Like Ramaswami, she is hoping her message will stick with voters because she is competing in one of Oklahoma’s youngest and tech-savviest districts: the state’s 5th, which includes parts of Oklahoma City.

She points out that the Biden administration recently designated Tulsa one of 31 inaugural Tech Hubs under the [Chips and Science Act](#). She also argues her background gives her an understanding of the state’s energy sector that sets her apart from Democrats at the national level, many of whom are calling for more aggressive environmental regulation.

FBI closely tracking China, Russia, Iran for efforts to target US elections

[Maggie Miller]

“We’re in a moment where party affiliation isn’t going to matter,” said Horn, who also talks frequently about more high-profile issues, like abortion, on her campaign’s Facebook page.

At the national level, several lawmakers with deep interest in cybersecurity — such as Reps. Mike Gallagher (R-Wisc.) and Jim Langevin (D-Rhode Island) — have recently headed for the exits. Their departures come as threats to U.S. hospitals, schools and water systems proliferate.

In an interview, Langevin said his focus on cybersecurity was viewed as a quirk when he first entered office, but that it slowly became a more mainstream issue by the time he left in January 2023.

He also argued the issue is only becoming more pressing. “The more people that are talking about it, the better,” he said.

In an interview at RSA, Nate Fick, the State Department’s ambassador at large for cyberspace and digital policy, said he met Horn at last year’s conference and argued it would be great “to have a generation of candidates for public office who recognize the importance of these issues and are comfortably fluent on them.” Fick cautioned that he doesn’t know Horn well enough to comment on her campaign specifically, though.

Horn and Ramaswami would not be the first candidates to run for office with cybersecurity expertise.

Rep. [Zach Nunn](#) (R-Iowa) worked on cybersecurity issues in the U.S. intelligence community and at the National Security Council prior to entering office. And while running for president on the Republican ticket last year, Republican Will Hurd, a former clandestine officer for the CIA, has made a point of demonstrating his cybersecurity [bonafides in interviews](#).

What is different, however, is how central the issue is to their campaign.

At an off-site sales hall at RSA, the Bay Area cybersecurity conference, Horn moved effortlessly from stall to stall to grill startup founders with warm but incisive questions about how their products really work and what privacy risks they might pose to consumers.

Horn said she wasn't there, strictly speaking at least, to campaign. She mainly wants to stay up-to-date with the latest threats and innovations in cybersecurity, she said — and better understand how to deal with them.

“A foreign adversary could turn the lights off in a city and entirely disrupt our health care system,” said Horn. “And that's terrifying, absolutely terrifying.”