The State of the States

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The "State of the States" (SOTS) is a non-partisan academic policy tool designed for US local and state governors as well as the wider populace of academics, journalists and those interested in US politics more broadly. The platform has three key features, being: an interactive map of US states with key information, forums to facilitate discussion between policymakers and a case study section of state-by-state policies. My project on the SOTS, as an Undergraduate Research Assistant, was overseen by Chris Gilson, the founder of the platform who has brought about significant developments over the past few years.
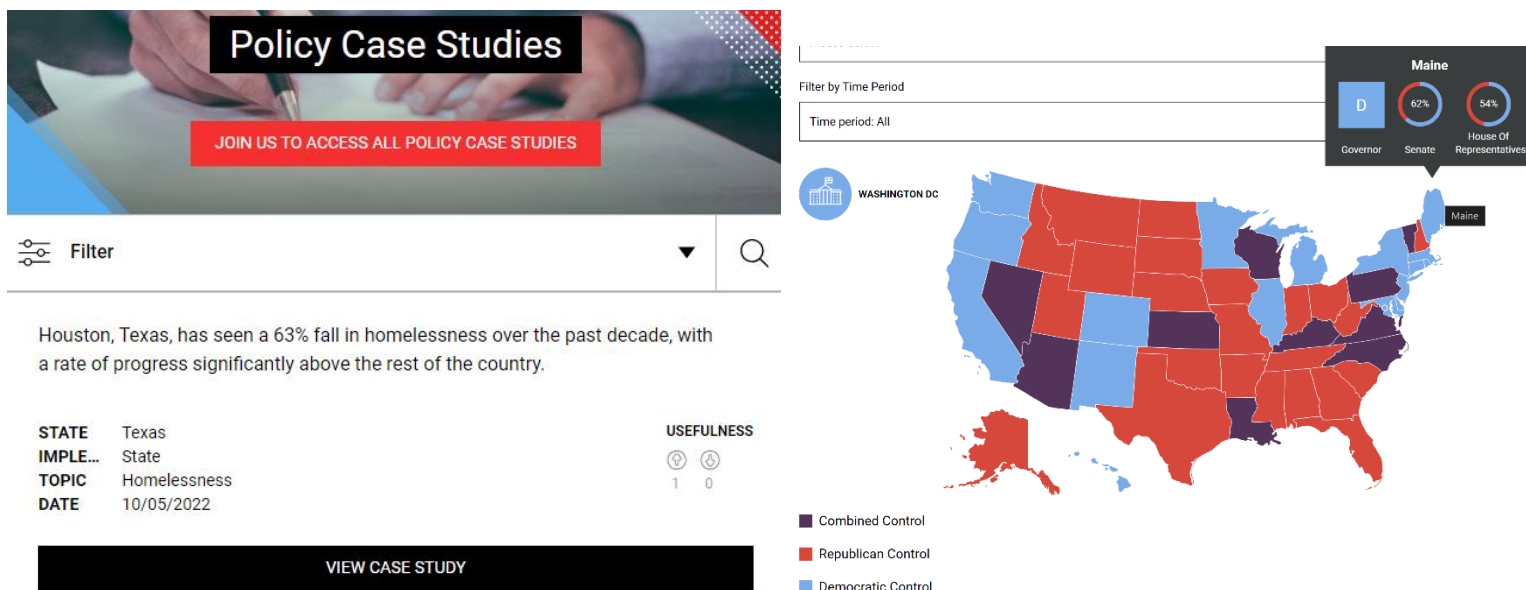

Figure 1: Different sections on the State of the States webpage

As a research assistant, of the main workstreams I was involved with was to provide literature reviews that helped diagnose a 'use-case' for the project. These reviews helped provide a basis for blog posts written by Chris Gilson and were posted on the LSE website, *here is an example*. The opportunity to delve into the intricacy of the benefits the SOTS platform can provide, and how an academic tool can be used with real-world implications, was a source of inspiration through my time at the Phelan US Centre.

Methods

Through conducting literature reviews on a number of topics, such as policy diffusion and organisational memory, it was possible to diagnose that the platform was able to solve what seemed to be a glaring issue affecting US policymakers. Official statistics coalesced with literature to show how both silo'ed thinking and organisational memory loss were perhaps problems at the fore of policymakers thoughts. The SOTS platform has been designed with

these issues in mind, providing a base of state-by-state case-study information and opportunities for policymakers, from different legislative units, to connect and conversate.

Working as a research assistant on such a unique project, my tasks often delved out of the academic and literature focussed avenues. Despite having set out a use-case for the platform, backed by literature reviews and the proceeding blog posts by Chris Gilson, one of my following tasks was to help provide options for outreach to connect the platform with likeminded peers. This task is a part of a fundamental process of commercialisation, getting the State of the States platform out to its intended audience and building a community which can itself help foster and develop the platform naturally. However, more than just cultivating an audience, by helping procure a list of potential users, it will be possible to receive feedback on how to best tailor the project to the needs of the end-users.

Personal Experience

The opportunity to work as a research assistant on a topic that is fairly non-traditional compared to the other options provided at the Phelan US Centre has been very rewarding. The SOTS platform is still developing, growing, and focusing on a commercialisation stage, to expand and help benefit a plethora of policymakers across the US. Being able to translate my own research interests into a project with tangible real-world benefits heightened my interests and allowed me to explore US politics from a lens completely anew. Both the non-standard type of research and freedom afforded by the project lead helped ensure a richly varied workload which allowed me to build on my practical skills and academic research ability. My work greatly bolstered and sharpened my knowledge of the not only the US political sphere, yet also the management literature surrounding idea and policy diffusion, transfer, and organisational memory.

The chance to work on an academic platform with an aim to democratise nonpartisan knowledge and heighten opportunities for policymakers has helped me approach and understand the industry of academia in a unique manner. The overall process was starkly different to previous academic experience, being a commercialisation project, allowing me to be part of a process intertwining the academic with a private product launch. Aiming to make a financially sustainable platform with a naturally evolving body of cases from an active user-base. My personal interests and desire to situate academic research with a plan to improve political systems for societal good coincided with this project, helping me further define my own research interests.

My experience as an Undergraduate Research Assistant was brought together with the chance to present my research at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research (BCUR). Whilst daunting, the support provided from the Phelan US Centre and my incredible project lead, Chris Gilson, helped this become the most enriching part of the overall experience. Being able to tie together my own research with the current progress of the State of the States allowed me to speak in front of a large audience on a project that I have found stimulating, rewarding, and engaging.