The Perfect Storm? Political Instability and Background Checks During COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has been observed to have increased aggressive behavior and violence in the United States. This study tests whether political instability events propelled gun purchasing behavior through a temporally sensitive analysis based on data drawn from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and monthly data from the FBI's NICS National Instant Criminal Background Check System. It utilizes a multi-methodological framework featuring both regression modeling and qualitative comparative analysis. While results from statistical inquiry do not lend support to significant associations of any single variable on the outcome, the comparative configurational inquiry does identify three salient pathways that brought about background check increases during COVID-19. All three solutions feature the conditions of political instability and presidential election events. Alongside these factors, mass shooting occurrences are present in two of the identified solutions. These findings reveal that COVID-19 fostered a set of conditions and the formation of a "Perfect Storm" which resulted in the greatest number of annual gun purchases in recorded history.

Keywords: Political Violence, Pandemic, Social Upheaval, Guns, Regulation, United States.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2020 arguably the most polarizing presidential election in modern American history transpired during a year that was marked and transformed by a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic began when news started breaking out in early 2020 from Wuhan, China that a virus was rapidly spreading among a major industrial area in the world's most populous country. By March of 2020, the virus spread to much of the Northern hemisphere and entire populations were placed on lock-down – everything from schools and universities to businesses and restaurants were shut down. For months on end, hundreds of millions of people were then quarantined and restricted from engaging in a heterogeneous collection of social interactions that they had been accustomed to for their entire lives. As it turned out, 2020 in the US was a year that grew to be dominated by events of political instability and varied forms of aggressive behavior. Along with the greatest frequency and numbers of protests arising in the history of the country (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020), there were more than a thousand different political instability events including riots, property destruction, and violence against civilians.

These profound recent developments pose many different questions and puzzles to the scientific community. A variety of different angles can be taken to investigate questions on political instability, aggressive behavior, and COVID-19 and one could even go as far as to argue that this recent wave of political instability in the US was driven by a distinct set of factors because in contrast to waves of political instability of the past, a public health crisis was ongoing. The public health crisis intersected between physical, psychological, economic, and social factors. COVID-19 has been correlated with increased worry about violence and risk of physical harm (Kravitz-Wirtz *et al*., 2014), an increase in pediatric firearm injuries (Bell, Robbins & Gosain, 2021), an increase in gun violence in certain US cities (Hatchimonji *et al*., 2020), increases in gender and intimate partner violence (Shalini & Singh 2020; Lyons & Brewer, 2021), decreases in mental health across age groups (Javed & Mehmood, 2020), among numerous other societal outcomes including increases in firearm purchases (Schleimer, McCort & Shev, 2021; Lang & Lang, 2021; Micalizzi, Zambrotta & Bernstein, 2021; Khubchandani & Price, 2021). For instance, more gun violence fatalities (19,380) and injuries (39,427) occurred in 2020 than in any single year from the previous two decades (Thebault & Rindler, 2021). Scholars have also discovered that COVID-19 had various associations with the outbreak of protest as well as political instability, yet it is unclear how political instability during COVID-19 impacted one of the more pressing issues of contemporary American society, rates of civilian armament and gun purchasing behavior. As of 2018, the rate of gun ownership in America was the highest per capita in the world with a whopping total of 393 million guns (120 firearms per

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100 people) (Karp, 2018). This total far surpasses every other country in the world, not to mention comparable liberal democratic states.

Individual firearm acquirement as a response to or in anticipation of political instability brought about by COVID-19 is a salient aspect of public health. It may even be the case that lockdowns and quarantines intensified the process of civilian armament in the US to previously unforeseen heights. For example, research on Google Trends data has found that when Donald Trump declared COVID-19 as a pandemic, searches on "gun preparation" (which comprise terms such as "buy guns," "clean guns," etc.) spiked around 40% in comparison to the average search rate from 2004 to March 2020 (Caputi *et al*., 2020). While insightful, aforementioned inquiries into COVID-19 and civilian armament have not investigated a very relevant and potentially causal phenomenon in the relationship between political instability and gun purchases. Political instability is defined as group-level conflict that occurs within a state. It can vary in scale and intensity from long civil wars to single day events such as riots and demonstrations in which anywhere from a few to no people get killed [14]. Political instability has wide-reaching societal impacts as it can increase societal polarization, decrease social cohesion, decrease trust in authorities, dampen the public good of public safety, and above all, it can result in violence and civilian fatalities due to pronounced levels of aggressive behavior. Turchin refers to political instability as one of the chief sources of human misery today as this phenomenon is responsible for more suffering within-states on a global scale than warfare between states (Turchin, 2012). The victims of political instability tend to be civilians that are involved in the events themselves along with innocent bystanders and in rarer cases, agents of the law enforcement and the state.

As an academic topic, political instability falls under the umbrella of aggressive behavior and has been researched across interdisciplinary outlets ranging from political science, history, and sociology to epidemiological inquiries. It is acknowledged that political instability is not a random phenomenon but tends to arise in waves in which are associated with complex dynamics including structural demographic changes (Turchin, 2005), economic crises, state collapse, and shifts in economic production (e.g., societies experiencing a transition from agrarianism to industrialization) [Turchin & Nefedov, 2009; Turchin, 2016). In prior research, Turchin identified that the American context in particular has been prone to waves of political instability as observed throughout event-based data on different forms of violence. The 1860s, 1920s, and late 1960s and early 1970s were time periods in which the US experienced the greatest frequency of political instability events per five-year cycle over the course of 1780-2010 (Turchin, 2012). This study investigates how a more recent wave of political instability arose during the height of COVID-19 (2020-21) and specifically how it impacted rates of civilian armament through assessment of FBI background check data. While media reports and several scholarly studies have identified that gun sales spiked throughout the noted time period, it is still unclear if political instability was significantly related to gun purchases during different periods of COVID-19. This study fills this gap and puts forward a timely analysis that is the first of its kind.

Through utilizing a multi-methodological approach to social inquiry, this study first draws from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) to analyze data on political instability events including riots and violence against civilians and then draws on background check data taken from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). The aim of this study is to analyze whether the frequency of monthly background checks that were initiated throughout 19 months (January 2020 to July 2021) were greater in comparison to the previous year and whether monthly spikes in political instability are correlated with increases in background checks during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Throughout the data gathering process, two primary sources of data were collected from publicly accessible sources, the first being the ACLED which is as an event-based data project that is made for disaggregated conflict analysis. The project is cross-national in scope and provides rich details on national as well as sub-national phenomena pertaining to countries from around the world. The specific types of political instability that were assessed include the following three forms:

Explosions/Remote violence – events featuring an explosion, bomb or other usage of an explosive. ACLED describes this form of violence as one that tends to be highly one-sided in its empirical manifestation. The second form of violence is referred to as violence against civilians and involves state

repression. The third form of violence is the most common of the three (when observed in the US context) and captures riot events which are described as either mob violence or violent demonstrations that often involve spontaneous actions by unorganized or unaffiliated members of society. In conjunction, these three types of events can be observed to variant frequency throughout the span of January 2020 to July 2021.

The methodological strategy of measuring these events was straightforward. Their occurrences were tallied on a monthly basis and coded into a continuous measure for each month in the time period under attention. This resulted in a continuous independent variable called "Political Instability." Alongside this independent variable, other characteristics also were coded into independent variables to assess their impact on monthly background checks. These factors are included due to their relevance to gun purchasing behavior either as variables that have direct causal potential or as controls.

Mass shooting occurrence – this is a dichotomous variable that is potentially causal and captures if a mass shooting (resulting in 3 or more fatalities, not including the offender) occurred in a given month (1 – mass shooting occurred; 0 – none). Scholars have found that over the last two decades, some mass shootings are correlated with upticks in background check frequencies (Wallace, 2019; Liu & Wiebe, 2019; Anisin, 2021).

Monthly GDP – this is a dichotomous variable that captures whether national level GDP decreased in a given month (GDP decrease = 1; Increase = 0). Data were drawn from the US. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) [24]. This variable serves as a control in the regression analysis. Interestingly enough, one of the largest drops in quarterly GDP in US history occurred in the second quarter of 2020 (estimated at -24% drop in GDP).

Presidential Election Voting – this is a dichotomous variable that is also potentially causal as it captures whether voting for a national election took place in a given month or if the results of a national election were due to be announced (1 = voting took place or results were announced; 0 = voting did not take place or results were not announced). A long stemming literature on gun purchasing behavior has related the threat of new regulations on firearm purchases to the incumbency of a Democratic Presidential administration. Hence, elections and electoral events that make up elections are often treated as variables in the study of gun purchasing behavior (Lemieux, 2014; Newman & Hartman, 2019).

Incumbent Democratic Administration – similar to the previous variable, this condition captures whether a Democratic Presidential administration was in office in a given month (1 = Democratic Presidential Administration in the White House; 0 = Republican Presidential Administration in the White house).

Holiday season – individuals tend to purchase more goods, including guns, in the holiday season that spans from November to December in the US. In conjunction with lots of sales and discounts (such as the Thanksgiving sale of "Black Friday") individuals tend to buy more goods in this time of the year because many get end of year bonuses from their employers.

This study will investigate how the total frequency of monthly political instability event occurrences along with other mentioned independent variables are associated with monthly background check increases. The dependent variable is dichotomous and labeled as a monthly increase in background check totals. It was coded as follows: 1 = there was an increase in the total number of initiated background checks in a given month when compared to the previous month; 0 = there was a decrease in the total number of initiated background checks in a given month when compared to the previous month. Data that were gathered for this dependent variable are publicly available by the FBI NICS background check system (FBI, 2021). Although background checks do not capture the totality of all gun purchases that get made within a given month in the US, in scholarly literature on armament, they serve as proxies. Along similar lines, this dependent variable captures a national level phenomenon that is aggregate of background check initiations that get requested and carried out across all 50 US states. The primary independent variable under attention, political instability, also is an aggregate measure of the total number of events that occur in a given month nationally.

2.1. Data Analysis

The empirical analyses of this study were carried out via two software applications – Stata 13 and the R Programming application (a QCA package). The former was used to illustrate descriptive statistics as well as diagrams of political instability events and background

check frequencies. It was also used to carry out multivariate logistic regression analysis. P-values of <0.05 were considered as statistically significant. The latter application, R (Dusa, 2019), was utilized to carry out a qualitative-comparative analysis (Ragin, 2000), and identify different sufficient configurations of conditions that can account for the outcome of increased background check frequencies. The data are monthly and span the time period of January 2020 to July of 2021 – capturing both stages of quarantines and lockdowns that were initiated in the US. The aim of utilizing a multi-methodological approach boils down to addressing the research question of this study through different angles and through a non-deterministic approach. Multi-methodological research in social science is increasing in scope and applicability. COVID-19 had such a profound and wide-reaching impact on society that it is likely many outcomes brought about by the pandemic, including political instability events and gun purchases, are not linear and occurred through complex processes. This is not to say that linear forms of causation are totally irrelevant to the outcome under attention in this study, but rather, supplementing a commonly used methodological approach (regression analysis) may help to uncover greater details that underlie aggressive behavior and gun purchases during COVID-19.

3. RESULTS

Beginning with descriptive statistics, Table **1** reveals a number of different characteristics surrounding the variables and outcome under attention.

In terms of political instability events, on average there were 60 events that arose throughout the nation across all 19 months under attention (January 2020 – July 2021). The figure below plots these event occurrences to illustrate the variance of political instability across this time period.

As displayed in Figure **1**, a huge uptick in political instability events occurred in May through July of 2020.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Monthly Characteristics

Variable	Mean	MIN | MAX
Political Instability Event	.60	3 | 257
Mass Shooting Occurrence	.42	0 | 1
Monthly GDP Decrease	.21	0 | 1
Presidential Election Event	.16	0 | 1
Democratic Administration	.36	0 | 1
Holiday Season Month	.10	0 | 1
Monthly Background Checks	3,411,643	2,702,702 | 4,691,738
More Background Checks in a given month than all 20 previous annual periods	.85	0 | 1
Increase in Background Checks compared to previous month	.52	0 | 1

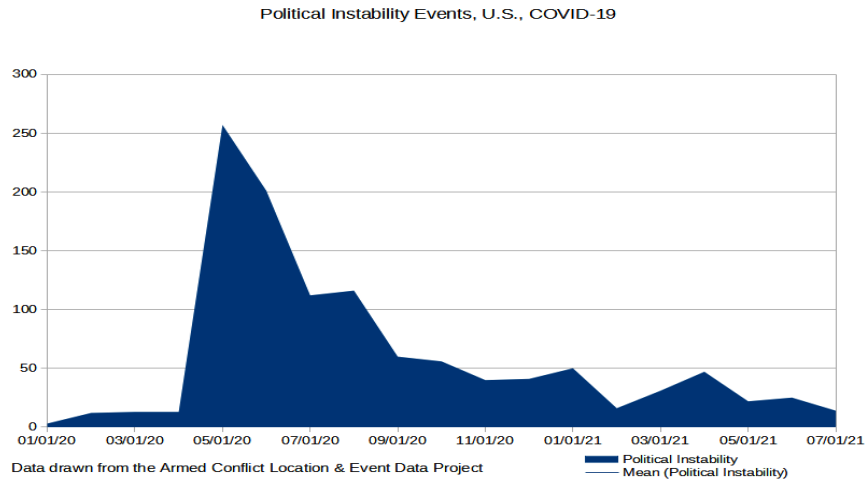

Figure 1: Political Instability Incidents across 2020.

This was a time period that was marked by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) led protests that emerged in large scale form across the nation after the death of civilian George Floyd. After having experienced quarantines, lockdowns, and social distancing for the duration of more than a quarter of the entire year leading up to this wave of political instability, millions of Americans went out into the streets to protest. There were also thousands who rioted and engaged in radical political actions. For example, riots broke out in numerous metropolitan areas throughout the country such as Minneapolis, Seattle, Washington D.C., and Portland among others. For nearly one month in the summer of 2020, an anarchist autonomous zone emerged in Seattle. The Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) was formed by left wing and anarchist activists in the city center after police abandoned the east precinct department. The area was then cordoned off and a radical form of socio-political organization ensued while other attempts at establishing control over state precincts were made in both Portland and Minneapolis. These are just several of the hundreds of different actions that made up a substantial number of political instability events which occurred throughout the period with the greatest concentration of such events in May to July.

In terms of the other independent variables and control variables, 42% of the all months under attention in this sample of cases experienced the occurrence of at least one mass shooting, and 21% of the months saw a negative rate of economic production and output as measured by monthly GDP rates. Only 16% of all months experienced a presidential election event (these were November and December of 2020 as well as January 2021). In 36% of months, a Democratic Presidential administration was in the White house (the Biden administration). As expected, only 10% of all months were marked by the Holiday season.

Before discussing the dependent variable, several accompanying characteristics can help us make sense of the profound increase in background check frequencies that can be observed during the height of COVID-19. The minimum number of monthly background check initiations was 2,702,702 and the maximum was 4,691,738. To put these numbers into perspective, up until 2010, not a single month of background check data featured more than 1 million monthly background check initiations, and from 2010-19, there were only five months that experienced more background checks than the month with the lowest total of the COVID-19 time period. Likewise, the initiation of 4,691,738 background checks in March of 2021 was the most in any single month to date. In total, there were 39,695,315 background checks carried out in the year 2020 alone – which is around 11 million more than the previous year and nearly 20 million more than in 2014 and thirty million more than were carried out in 1999. Figure **2** below helps illustrate the number of monthly initiations throughout the COVID-19 period.

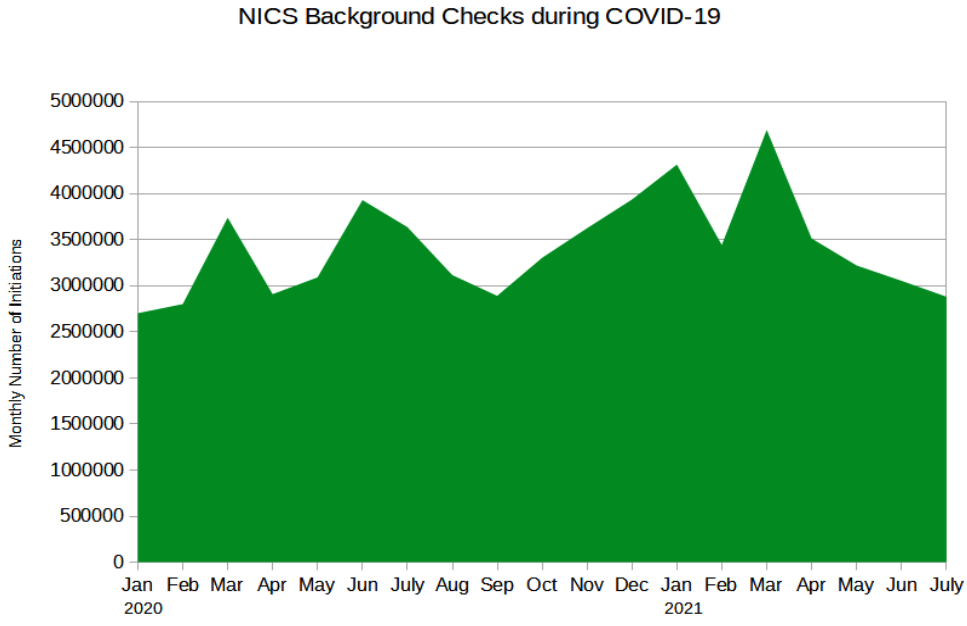

Figure 2: Background Checks during COVID-19, 2020-21.

As revealed in the figure above, there is variance inherent to the total number of monthly background checks that have been initiated throughout the period of COVID-19. It is likely that within this historical time period, different qualitative and temporally sensitive processes brought about increased background checks. For example, there are several spikes that arose including one in March of 2020, one from May to July, and two more spikes that occurred in the holiday season, presidential election cycle of 2020, and again in March of 2021. The multi-methodological empirical analyses in this study will enable us to investigate whether any single net-effect can account for increased background checks across these 19 months and whether different combinations of variables can provide an answer to this empirical puzzle.

In terms of the dependent variable that will investigated through multilevel regression analysis, increases in monthly background checks (over the previous month) occurred across 52% of all months under attention. To explain this complex outcome and test the hypothesis of whether political instability events are significantly correlated with increases in background check frequencies, we now turn to the first of this study's empirical tests.

Table **2** features a multilevel logistic regression that was carried out. Unfortunately, monthly political instability event totals are not significantly correlated with background check increases (p value 0.05 < 0.567). The coefficient is also very small for this independent variable (.005). Mass shooting occurrences also are negatively correlated with background check increases and are not statistically significant as is the variable capturing monthly GDP decreases. The presidential election variable also misses out on statistical significance (0.05 < 0.998), but it does have the strongest coefficient value of all variables. The last two variables, the presence of a Democratic administration in the White House and holiday season have negative coefficient values and are not statistically significant. Interestingly enough, even though the coefficient of political instability events is not as great as the coefficient of the presidential election variable, the p value of the political instability event is the closest to statistical significance of all variables in the regression model and is nearly twice as strong as the election variable.

Considering the lack of statistical significance identified in this model, I will not run post-diagnostic tests to assess its validity and sensitivity. However, these results beg a very important question – what if the net-effects of each of these variables is simply not enough, on its own, to be able to explain the outcome? This brings me to the second methodological strategy that will be adopted in this study, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). This framework stems back to methodologist Charles Ragin who created QCA in the 1980s as a computational method that would take on middle ground between qualitative and quantitative methods (Ragin, 2000). This framework has since seen significant implementation throughout the social sciences. QCA and its variants (fuzzy-set QCA; crisp-set QCA) differ from general statistical analysis and probabilistic forms of explanation because of their basis in Boolean algebra and set theory. A central task of this approach is for researchers to analyze how necessary and sufficient conditions as well as the configurations (combinations) of those conditions can account for an outcome of interest.

Table 2: Multilevel Logistic Regression

Independent Variables	
Political Instability Event	.005
Mass Shooting Occurrence	-.582
Monthly GDP Decrease	-.487
Presidential Election Event	18.2
Democratic Administration	-.282
Holiday Season Month	-.276
Prob > chi2	0.967

NOTE: P>|z| values are interpreted for each independent variable at the following levels:

*Significant at 10% **Significant at 5%. ***Significant at 1%.

In statistical analyses and in the greater whole of regression methods that rely on significance tests, "net effects" thinking reigns supreme (Ragin, 2000). This means that variables are held constant at each factor's average in order to assess how a single independent variable influences the dependent variable. This entails that if an independent variable is influential in only a handful of cases, but in some cases indefinitely, this effect might be "invisible" in the output as it will inflate variance and deflate coefficients (Vis, 2012). The epistemological basis of QCA is reliant on the assumption that single variables on their own rarely can show their effect on the outcome variable without the interaction of other variables. Causality in QCA can be described as complex, equifinal, asymmetric and conjunctural (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010). Equifinality is used to describe how there may exist more than one causal pathway to an outcome while

conjunctural causation implies that in causal relationships, single conditions may not display their effects on their own, but only in conjunction with other conditions. Could it be the case that in conjunction with political instability events, other phenomena such as mass shootings, presidential elections, or the holiday season form sufficient combinations that can account for background check increases during COVID-19?

To investigate these claims through comparative methodology, I will utilize a recently developed R programming software package. This approach will enable the identification of set-theoretic associations between conditions (as well as combinations of conditions) and their relation to an outcome (i.e., in QCA terminology, the dependent variable is referred to as an outcome while variables are referred to as conditions). An intersection of a condition with another condition entails that those connections empirically exist in a given data case (each month from January 2020 – July 2021). Through comparing the intersections found in individual rows of data featuring cases (attempted and completed mass shootings) and their characteristics, QCA will enable me to identify potentially combinations of conditions that can account for why background checks increase during COVID-19.

Below, all possible conditions and their association with the outcome are listed in a Truth Table. Over viewing the Truth Table is a necessary stage in any QCA inquiry because it lists all possible combinations of conditions (including their presence and absence) that can logically bring about the outcome. In the "Outcome" column, a value of 1 is assigned to combinations that feature a high consistency. The general acceptable consistency threshold ranges from .75 to .80 – since the .62 consistency level in the fourth row of this Truth Table is below these ranges, this row as well as all rows below it featuring combinations that are low in consistency are assigned a value of O.

The aim of QCA has to do with identifying the salience and the degree to which a combination of conditions is present or absent when the outcome occurs or does not occur. This brings us to the main empirical stage of QCA which is referred to as Standard Analysis. Here, cases and different combinations of conditions that fall into the outcome that are marked as 1 in the Truth Table are computationally analyzed with relation to those that are marked as O. In running this assessment, all dichotomous variables (including the dependent variable) remained in the same coded format. The only variable that was recoded was the political instability event variable which took on the following values (1.0 – 100 or more monthly events; .67 – 50 or more monthly events; .33 – 30 or more monthly events; 0 – less than 30 monthly events). This is what is referred to as a "fuzzy-set" coding classification because cases in which the value of .67 are assigned fall into the "presence" category of a condition, while those coded with .33 fall out of a set.

Interpreting results from Standard Analysis is done through output and the concepts of consistency and coverage. These concepts are the measuring parameters for set-theoretic relationships between condition and the outcome. Consistency represents the total percentage of cases (and their characteristics) that can explain if an outcome is present, while

Table 3: QCA Truth Table

Political Instability	Mass Shooting	Monthly GDP Drop	Presidential Election	Democratic Admin	Holiday Season	Outcome	Raw Consistency
1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.62
0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0.5
0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.5
0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0.5
0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0.4
1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0.25
1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0

coverage tells us the proportion of outcome occurrences that a given solution can account for across the data (case years in which success was experienced by a campaign). Both consistency and coverage range from 0.0 to 1.0 – with the latter indicating full-set membership between a condition and the outcome and the former indicating no set membership. The higher the consistency of a given solution, the more relevant it is in its association with the outcome. Table **4** below illustrates the output that Standard Analysis produced.

Standard Analysis identified three different solutions, each accounting for 7% of the all cases in which the outcome occurred – meaning that these three solutions can explain around a fifth of cases in which background checks increased in a given month when compared to the previous month. Each solution explains why background checks increased in a given month from January 2020 to July 2021. The first solution tells us that months in which 100 or more political instability events were experienced alongside at least one mass shooting, a presidential election event, and the incumbency of a Democratic Party administration. The second solution is similar as it accounts for increased background checks that occurred during months in which 100 or more political instability events arose alongside at least one mass shooting and a drop in monthly GDP in time periods marked by presidential election events and the holiday season. The difference between this solution when compared to the first solution is that it includes the presence of the condition of holiday seasonality. The third solution, in contrast, is the only solution that is missing the condition of a mass shooting occurrence. It features both the conditions of political instability events and presidential election events.

All three solutions feature the presence of political instability events and the presidential election condition. These are the two most important conditions and both are reliant on the absence and presence of other factors in their makeup of sufficient configurations that can account for background check increases. This is a principal finding and one that has salient implications for our knowledge of gun purchasing behavior during COVID-19. Below, Figure **3** illustrates the different set-intersections that form the three identified solutions through a Venn Diagram. The figure also illustrates every single possible logical combination of the six conditions under attention in this analysis.

This figure was produced via the R programming language and an associated QCA package (Dusa, 2019). It illustrates the three identified solutions. In detail, it shows us how identified solutions featuring both the presence and absence of the six conditions intersect with one another and the outcome. The three identified solutions are shaded in green while the areas in white are logical remainders. Logical remainders represent combinations of case characteristics that are not found in the data. Indeed, there are many logical remainders in these models because of the relatively small number of months in the data (19 in total). If there were say, 190 months rather than 19, far fewer logical remainders would in this Venn Diagram because more empirical observations would be included in the data. Nevertheless, this should not be considered a drawback of this analysis because the aim is to investigate the period of recent history that has been marked by COVID-19. This qualitatively important historical time period is temporally limited and hence, there is less data overall and more logical remainders than would typically be observed in analyses that focus on longer time periods.

Moreover, interpreting this Venn diagram enables one to not only understand but to visualize how conditions and sets of conditions intersect across the range of data under attention (19 months). On the outer edges of the figure, single conditions are shown without intersecting with other conditions. For example, the condition of "Mass Shooting" is represented by the number “2.” The pathway (1*2*4*6) shaded in green underneath this condition features this condition along with political instability, presidential election events, and holiday seasonality. Although one cannot infer any

Table 4: QCA Solutions for Increased Monthly Background Checks

Solution(s)	Coverage	Consistency
1) PS * Mass Shooting * ~Monthly GDP Decrease * Pres Election * Dem Admin * ~Holiday Season	.07	1
2) PS * Mass Shooting * ~Monthly GDP Decrease * Pres Election * ~Dem Admin * Holiday Season	.07	1
3) PS * ~Mass Shooting * Monthly GDP Decrease * Pres Election * ~Dem Admin * Holiday Season	.07	1
Total Model: Coverage - .21; Consistency – 1		

Figure 3: Venn Diagram of QCA Solutions.

direct causal effect from a QCA based inquiry, the analysis presented here does enable us to identify regularities that are inherent to background check increases during COVID-19. As observed through the three identified solutions, the regularities identified enable us to grasp how conjunctural processes bring about gun purchases based around the common presence of both political instability and presidential election events and their interaction with other conditions. Temporally, these solutions clearly capture processes that occurred in different points of the 19 months under attention and under varying COVID-19 restrictions. For example, there was an upsurge in gun purchases that coincided with political instability events during the onset of the BLM protests and numerous riots that occurred throughout the country during this time period. There also was an upsurge in gun purchases during the presidential election period – especially in the highly controversial transfer of power stage that occurred after rumors of election fraud were voiced by the incumbent leader and some of his supporters. A critical juncture can be observed at what can be considered to be the height of the presidential election event condition when the US Capitol building saw thousands of civilians occupy its surroundings then enter its premises. On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters entered the Capitol Hill building in Washington DC (at a time when part of Congress was in session), in order to dispute the electoral result that placed Joe Biden ahead of Trump.

The rioters occupied parts of the Congressional building, engaged in vandalism, and had adverse interactions with law enforcement officers. In total, five people died and hundreds were injured. The importance of this event was not that it was completely unprecedented in terms of the American political process and its associated norm of peaceful transfers of power, but in that a major political instability directly coincided with a presidential election event and was brought about by it. There were 4,317,804 background checks initiated in January of 2021 – a total that is

nearly twice as much January of the previous year (2020 – 2,702, 702) and is astronomical when compared to the amounts of background checks carried out in the month of January across the early 2000s. Throughout a six-year period of 1999 to 2005, there were 4,572,220 background checks carried out in all January months combined. January of 2021 was a pivotal month in terms of national level aggregate gun purchases made by Americans. This high total of background check initiations was not a random occurrence, nor was it brought about by a sole factor or the net effect of one variable. What occurred in January of 2021 was a conjunctural process and a process that is empirically factual. This process has crucial implications for our understanding of potential causal relationships between explanatory factors and an outcome. Had the regression analysis been the final step in this study's empirical assessment of background check increases, regularities inherent to the phenomenon under attention would not have been identified. The events and interactions that occurred in this particular month illustrate the necessity of taking a conjunctural or configurational approach to study aggressive behavior and civilian armament.

4. DISCUSSION

During the different phases and lockdowns brought about by COVID-19, background check frequencies sharply increased which means the pandemic did not repel people from going to their local gun shops to purchase arms. This study has revealed that empirically, the opposite occurred. The numerous circulating media images of long lines of social distanced shoppers standing outside of gun shops were not imitations or photo edited – millions of people did indeed buy guns during the height of COVID-19 (Williams, 2021). So many purchases were made that it amounted to record background check initiations, record breaking totals that few could have foreseen. Alongside the salient impact that electoral events had in coinciding with political instability events during this time period, the condition of a mass shooting occurrence was also present in two of the three solutions identified in this study's QCA inquiry. In spring of 2021, as most schools began to re-open across the United States and a majority of states eased COVID restrictions, several mass shootings occurred such as the February 9, 2021 Minnesota medical clinic shooting (1 fatality; 4 injuries), the March 16, 2021 Atlanta spa shootings (8 fatalities; 1 injury), the March 22, 2021 Boulder, Colorado grocery store shooting (10 fatalities; 1 injury), and the March 31, southern California office shooting (4 fatalities; 2 injuries). March of 2021 experienced the most background checks initiated on a month to date in history (4,691,738), and hence, it is not surprising that mass shootings do take up an important place in the two of three identified solutions.

In recent inquiry on the relationship between mass shootings and background checks, scholars coined this particular relationship as the mass shootings-background check nexus and investigated data of 213 attempted and completed mass shootings from 1999-2020. These inquiries focus on a time period that can be referred to as pre-COVID-19. They revealed that over the last two decades, mass shootings contributed to a discourse of fear. Specifically, mass shootings that arose in areas of cultural importance including shopping malls, movie theaters, schools, among others, were found to be significantly related to increased background check frequencies (Anisin, 2021). A causal mechanism that was associated with this nexus has to do with perceptions of public safety. Beliefs about public safety can transform for the worst because of public attacks that get carried out by mass shooters. Media sensationalize their reporting on such attacks, and public consciousness becomes gripped by fear. In light of the reoccurring nature of mass shootings in America, part of the populace has reverted to self-defense because they perceive that their security in public areas is under threat. Indeed, there is also a part of the populace that is afraid of new gun regulations, and in turn, likely stockpile weapons. Such preferences however, have always been around because gun regulation is not a new topic. Mass shootings importantly, have become more common and frequent in the US and have concurrently had a profound impact on civilian armament.

The expectation that gun violence can get targeted at civilians in public at any given place and at any given time is an especially prominent psychological factor. Because of this random aspect of mass shootings, this rare form of homicide has credibly undermined the public good of public safety in the US. A similar mechanism likely drove the large increase in background checks during COVID-19 which fostered a set of conditions that were the "perfect storm" for gun purchases. Here, the public good of public safety was once again undermined, albeit through a slightly different manner and process. The waves of political upheaval that arose in the turbulent year of 2020 were spurred by a pandemic, police brutality, mass protest, and above all, were accompanied by calls to defund law enforcement. Mass media and social networks

were overridden with stories, images, and short clips of looted urban areas along with groups of masked rioters – with burnt cars and buildings in their shadow. While hundreds of thousands (and by some estimates, millions) peacefully marched, occupied, and demonstrated against a range of ailments of the political status quo (Chenoweth *et al*., 2020), there were also rioters and looters that burned metropolitan areas ranging from Los Angeles to Portland to New York. As both corporate and small business shops were being set on fire and broken glass piled alongside once busy city sidewalks, often, police stood by without arresting looters. In the most extreme of cases, in Seattle, an entire police precinct was abandoned as activists cordoned off a major part of the city center. These events undoubtedly had an impact on civilians' perceptions of the public good of public safety and with great personal, social, and political uncertainty looming in the minds of millions of Americans, many turned to self-armament.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has carried out a multi-methodological inquiry of political instability events and gun purchases that occurred during COVID-19 in the US. It drew from two different data sources in order to investigate forms of publicly exerted aggressive behavior and their relation to background check initiations. This period of recent history was one that was marked by uncertainty, fear, and violence. Locked down and quarantined throughout much of the winter and spring of both 2020 and 2021, tens of millions of civilians broke out of psychologically difficult conditions to protest and rebel against a heterogeneous collection of authority structures. Some months saw hundreds of political instability events which were not limited to either left wing or right-wing grievances, but rather, political instability was driven by a variant collection of factors totaling to what scholars have referred to as some of the "broadest" bouts of dissent experienced in US history (Chenoweth *et al*., 2020). This study found that the net effect of a number of relevant variables that have hitherto been associated with background check increases, including political instability events, were insignificant.

Since this study adopted a multi-methodological approach, it did not end its social inquiry after null results were produced by a regression analysis, but rather, it delved into exploring potential conjunctural forms of causation that underlie the relationship between political instability events and background checks. The QCA based investigation identified three sufficient solutions that can explain why background checks increased across different points in time throughout 19 months from January 2020 to July 2021. The three solutions reveal that political instability as well as presidential election events are salient factors that combine with other conditions including mass shooting occurrences and holiday seasonality to bring about background checks increases in a given month. The other conditions in the solutions that appeared at least once were the presence of a Democratic incumbent presidential administration and monthly decreases in GDP. These three solutions clearly capture different qualitative events and time periods that arose during the height of COVID-19 in the US. Without adopting a multi-methodological approach, such events and processes that hold qualitative importance would not be able to have been detected.

In contrast to previous trends of gun purchasing behavior that can be observed throughout prior decades in US history including perceptions of new Federal regulations and mass shootings, during COVID-19, political instability events coincided with these dynamics. Finally, despite the bold limitation that is inherent to the usage of background check data as a proxy for gun purchases, the identified findings in this study have important implications for public knowledge and policy on gun purchasing behavior, potential regulatory pathways, and how gun purchases relate to political instability. It is clear that across the last several decades of history, civilians in the US have purchased guns according to different concerns and reasons, but when it comes to the emergence of the recent historical time period marked by COVID-19 in the US, grievances intensified, the public good of public safety was inhibited, and gun purchases soared to never-before-seen levels. As a response to potential aggressive behavior, millions of civilians bought more guns, an action that in itself can be considered to exemplify a signal to engage in future aggressive behavior. COVID-19 had a substantial impact on political instability events and US politics which contributed to a lethal cocktail of uncertainty and fueled the biggest surge in background checks that can be observed since the founding of the NICS. Whether this upsurge in civilian armament will continue in years ahead remains to be seen.

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