

# Managing Foreign Influence: Autocratic Strategies in Regulating the Import of Foreign Movies

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**Abstract:** As nations forge stronger economic links in globalization, the interchange of ideas and cultural norms naturally follows. How would countries regulate the inflow of foreign information? This study delves into the movie importation pattern among autocratic nations, particularly during election years. I argue that autocratic regimes face a dilemma when intervening in foreign cultural products. On the one hand, autocratic leaders need to minimize the political consequences of foreign movies. On the other hand, autocratic leaders need to avoid public criticism regarding tight information control. Furthermore, this dilemma varied by political conditions. It would be more serious when autocratic countries are politically unstable, such as during election year. Drawing from an original movie release dataset, I demonstrate that autocratic countries reduce the importation of political protest movies during election years due to the downside risks elections pose. Conversely, to maintain an image of media freedom and deflect public criticism, the importation of family romance movies, which generally lack political undertones, remains consistent during election years.

**Keywords:** Trade in Cultural Product, Autocratic Regime, Information Control

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# 1 Introduction

How would autocratic countries regulate the inflow of foreign information? Faced with a high rate of coup-led deposition (Svolik, 2009; Goldstone and North, 1982; Acemoglu, Egorov and Sonin, 2021), autocratic leaders often meticulously optimize their information control structures (Egorov and Sonin, 2020). Literature has demonstrated that autocratic leaders often strategically organize the information flow to control the kind of information their citizens can access while gathering enough signals from potential threats (Egorov and Sonin, 2020). While much is known about how autocracies suppress domestic media (Besley and Prat, 2006; Keremoglu and Weidmann, 2020; Lorentzen, 2014; Djankov et al., 2003), less is understood about how they restrict unwanted foreign ideas without risking a revolt. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining how autocratic governments handle the transmission of foreign movies.

Movies are a vital source of entertainment for many people. As filmmaking technology advances, citizens' demand for engaging entertainment continues to increase. In 2019, there were 7.9 billion theater admissions worldwide. Movies provide audiences with a window into the cultural nuances, behaviors, and values of foreign societies, which would potentially challenge the status quo. Scholars have found that movies possess the ability to influence viewers' perspectives on a range of topics, including social issues, love and marriage, and government functions (Franklin, 2006; Ortega-Liston, 2000; Pautz and Warnement, 2013). Film content can act as a propaganda tool, shaping political opinions (Combs, 2013; Parry-Giles, 2010; Mutz, 2001), while movie stars can amplify the celebrity effect on voting behavior (Ross,

2011; Harvey, 2018; Critchlow, 2013). Unwanted ideas can be particularly dangerous for unstable regimes during politically sensitive periods (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2022). The key question, then, is how a country regulates the inflow of foreign information to achieve the purpose of satisfying its citizens' entertainment needs without triggering potential social unrest, particularly during times of political instability.

I contend that autocratic leaders face a dilemma in dealing with the regulation of foreign movies. On the one hand, being familiar with the uncertain outcomes of foreign films, autocratic leaders have an incentive to mitigate the influences these films might introduce. To minimize the risk of film-induced social unrest, autocratic leaders would actively reduce the number of movies with political content or themes that challenge their authority. On the other hand, there's also a need for autocratic leaders to sidestep public backlash over excessive control of foreign cultural imports. To mask their intervention in movie importation, autocratic leaders may place greater emphasis on continuing to import films that focus primarily on entertainment, such as action, comedy, or romance genres.

Moreover, the dilemma varies based on their political stability. It would be more serious when autocratic leaders are politically unstable, such as in election years. The transfer of political power in these countries often generates an unstable social and political environment, making citizens more vulnerable to the influence of undesirable foreign ideas. Furthermore, an election year inherently poses a risk for autocratic leaders, suggesting, even the faintest, possibility of a shift in power dynamics. The unstable political arrangement motivated the autocratic leaders to exert control in cultural product importation. Autocratic leaders must strategically adjust the composition of movie releases to achieve a balance between limiting unwanted

content and preserving the appearance of media freedom when they are politically unstable. I, thus, argue that autocrats will reduce the importation of politically sensitive movies during election years compared to when they are not in the election year, while allowing the continued import of non-politically sensitive films.

To test these arguments, I compiled an original dataset on movie releases. The dataset includes 113 political-protest movies from 1919 to 2020 and 167 family-oriented romance films from 1922 to 2020. The dataset provides detailed information on each movie's production specifics, release information and box-office performance across 135 countries. I leveraged the exogenous timing of elections to examine foreign movie importation patterns in autocratic countries, using election data from the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset (NELDA) ([Hyde and Marinov, 2012](#)). The results show that, compared to democratic countries, non-democratic nations significantly decreased the import of politically sensitive movies during election years, while not intervening in the import of romantic family films. The strategic pattern is most evident in competitive elections, showing that the downside risk along with election-driven the strategic regulation pattern among autocratic countries. This finding enhances our understanding of how autocratic regimes navigate the challenges posed by the globalization of information and ideas and highlights the neglected aspect of idea diffusion in political science.

## **2 Information Control in Autocratic Countries**

### **2.1 Domestic Information Regulation**

How autocratic leaders manage information flow has attracted certain attention among scholars. But most of the attention falls in the context of domestic media.

Domestic media such as newspapers and television news can directly influence citizens' preferences through agenda-setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller, 1980; Yagade and Dozier, 1990), priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010; Valentino, 1999; Iyengar and Simon, 1993), and framing (Brewer, Graf and Willnat, 2003; Igartua and Cheng, 2009; Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2019). Autocratic leaders are known to exert tight control over media information flow (McMillan and Zoido, 2004; Guriev and Treisman, 2019). They increasingly rely on information manipulation, rather than resorting to more severe measures such as imprisonment or assassination, to deter opposition (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). The information regulation strategy is often associated with various factors, including economic inequality (Petrova, 2008), natural resource wealth (Egorov, Guriev and Sonin, 2009), the government's need to mobilize citizens for specific purposes, and the costs associated with controlling media outlets (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014).

While complete control over domestic media is appealing to autocratic leaders, it comes with certain costs (Egorov and Sonin, 2020). Autocrats still require news reports to gather information about potential opposition to their regime ((Egorov and Sonin, 2020). Excessively tight control over domestic media may cause them to miss critical signals of rebellion, ultimately jeopardizing their hold on power (Egorov and Sonin, 2020). Recognizing these potential costs, autocratic leaders often strategically design their information control structures concerning domestic news (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2015; Hollyer, Peter Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2018; Kosterina, 2017; Boleslavsky, Shadmehr and Sonin, 2020). Sometimes, autocratic states strategically avoid censoring moderate bad news to prevent citizens from assuming that the situation is worse than reported due to an absence

of information (Shadmehr and Bernhardt, 2015). Some autocratic states even prefer transparency to reduce the risk of internal challenges (Hollyer, Peter Rosendorff and Vreeland, 2018; Kosterina, 2017; Boleslavsky, Shadmehr and Sonin, 2020), which leads to the fact that some autocratic countries allow a higher level of media freedom than democratic countries (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014).

The way autocratic leaders maintain domestic media sheds light on their awareness of the importance of information flow. It lays the foundation for why countries still allow a certain level of media freedom (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). However, most of the literature on how autocratic leaders control information focuses solely on domestic sources. The existing literature largely overlooks how autocratic leaders manage the influx of foreign ideas, particularly in the form of culturally influential products such as movies. This paper seeks to fill this gap by investigating autocratic regulation of foreign movie imports, which can serve as a conduit for foreign ideas and ideologies. By examining the strategies employed by autocratic governments to control the dissemination of foreign films, we can further our understanding of how these regimes navigate the challenges posed by the globalization of information and ideas.

## **2.2 Foreign Cultural Products**

As countries become more connected through trade, investment, and other forms of economic exchange, ideas and norms are also transmitted across borders. Scholars have identified that globalization could stimulate the spread of labor rights standards, human rights norms, environmental governance, gender equality norms, and more (Greenhill, Mosley and Prakash, 2009; Hafner-Burton, 2005; Hafner-Burton

and Tsutsui, 2005; Greenhill, 2010; Mosley and Uno, 2007). However, the diffusion of ideas led by the exchange of manufactured goods is an indirect outcome of globalization. Trade in cultural products, such as movies, can directly shape people's perceptions and attitudes.

Films, as the most psychologically persuasive art form (Lee and Paddock, 2000), can provide additional information and pseudo-experiences to the audience, altering their perceptions to societal concerns, romantic relationships and matrimony, as well as the roles of government (Miller, 1999; Franklin, 2006; Ortega-Liston, 2000; Pautz and Warnement, 2013). For instance, Riggle, Ellis and Crawford (1996) demonstrated that media exposure significantly and positively affects consumers' attitudes towards homosexuality (Riggle, Ellis and Crawford, 1996). Sisson and Kimport (2016) discovered that watching a movie about third-trimester abortion led to an increased understanding of patients and providers involved in later-term abortions, as well as heightened support for legal access to third-trimester abortions (Sisson and Kimport, 2016).

Furthermore, movies can directly influence citizens' political preferences. Film content can act as a propaganda tool, shaping political opinions (Combs, 2013; Parry-Giles, 2010; Mutz, 2001), while movie stars can amplify the celebrity effect on voting behavior (Ross, 2011; Harvey, 2018; Critchlow, 2013). Viewers obtain considerable political information from various television sources (Mutz, 2001). Film's portrayal of political events can directly impact audience opinions (Combs, 2013). For example, Parry-Giles (2010) found that watching the West Wing affected citizens' views on the U.S. presidency. Sun-Li (2022) revealed that importing political protest movies could increase social protests against autocratic governments for autocratic coun-

tries. Moreover, Hollywood celebrities' endorsements significantly sway voters' political preferences, which catalyze changes in voter perceptions and actions (Ross, 2011; Harvey, 2018; Critchlow, 2013).

## 2.3 Foreign Cultural Product Censorship

The inflow of cultural products certainly requires regulations to avoid negative change on domestic social norms, bypass unfavorable government images, and hurt local film producers. Almost all countries have imposed movie import regulations to limit the number and selective content allowed in the domestic market (Lee and Bae, 2004; Ulf-Møller, 2001; Grimm, 2015). Regarding content censorship, most film regulation centers on movie rating among democracies. For example, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) of the United Kingdom is responsible for rating films intended to be released in the UK. The rating system ranges from Universal to R18. The BBFC has the right to cut content or edit the film for granting a rating, and local authorities can ban a film within their jurisdiction (Robertson and Robertson, 2005). Autocracies, such as Russia or China, more often impose licensing regulations. All foreign films need to be granted a license before being released. The authority has the right to heavily edit or ban a movie before granting a license for public screening (Biltreyst, Vande Winkel and Winkel, 2013).

Regarding quota limits, many countries impose either a numerical quota or a screen quota to decrease foreign movie inflow or protect the local film industry. For example, South Korea has a screen quota system that requires cinemas to screen domestic films for a minimum number of days per year (Kim, 2000; Messerlin and Parc, 2014; Il Kim, Lee and Kim, 2008). France has similar screen quota regulations that



require a certain percentage of their content to be European-produced and French-produced (Messerlin and Parc, 2014). China has a strict quota system for foreign films. The quota has been adjusted over time but typically permits around 34 foreign films to be released annually on a revenue-sharing basis (Wu et al., 2022; Song, 2018).

Censorship policies are generally stable over time, yet their application can vary based on movie content and domestic conditions. Films can exert both long-term and short-term effects on audiences. The long-term impact often arises from portrayals of exotic lifestyles or specific social norms, influencing domestic citizens' preferences even without explicit political content. While censorship policies typically target these lasting influences, movies can also generate immediate effects. For instance, research suggests that films depicting crime can instigate copycat behaviors, precipitating real-world violence (Surette, 2002, 2007; Stack, 2005). In response to such short-term impacts, countries might deviate from established policies, adjusting their censorship approaches. Consequently, while the overarching policy aims to counter long-term effects, on-the-ground censorship decisions can vary, reflecting differing political contexts. In this paper, I theorize and empirically investigate the varied censorship behavior among autocratic countries.

## **3 Theory**

### **3.1 Dilemma in Regulating Foreign Information**

I argue that autocratic leaders are facing a dilemma when regulating the influx of foreign movies. On one hand, autocratic leaders are aware of the uncertain outcomes of foreign cultural products. Citizens of autocratic countries are bombarded

with propaganda and state-controlled media. A thought-provoking movie can provide a fresh perspective, enabling them to see beyond the state narrative. Furthermore, as an entertainment tool, movies can help break down psychological defenses that have been built up over time through constant propaganda (Lee and Paddock, 2000). They can create a window of opportunity for citizens to embrace new ways of thinking about governance and politics. In addition to this, watching movies in theaters can create a shared experience among citizens, making it easier for them to discuss and debate the ideas presented in the movie. Shared memories induced by movies could reveal the shared neural structure for individuals under other circumstances (Chen et al., 2017). Facing a high rate of coup-led deposition, autocratic leaders have motivation to decrease foreign cultural products to enter the domestic market.

On the other hand, these leaders must also consider the disadvantages of stringent information control. The drawbacks of such control stem from three main areas. First, allowing a certain level of media freedom would allow autocratic leaders to gauge the capabilities and intentions of opposition groups. Excessive censorship, especially of foreign movies, might obscure these crucial insights. Second, the degree of transparency in disseminating information often correlates with public trust in the regime (Kerr and Lührmann, 2017). Overzealous restriction on foreign content can erode the public's confidence in the legitimacy of the ruling entity. Third, as the demand for varied entertainment grows domestically and pressures from international movie distributors mount, excessive censorship can become a focal point for both internal and external criticisms. Curtailing the import of foreign movies not only reduces entertainment choices, potentially causing domestic unrest, but also

affects the revenues of international distributors, leading to potential tensions with foreign entities.

Moreover, the dilemma autocratic leaders face is not static. It intensifies during times of political instability, particularly in election years. These periods can precipitate two distinct scenarios that prompt autocratic leaders to strategically regulate the influx of foreign cultural products. First, election years could attract social instability. With a manipulated election looming, citizens may find this an opportune moment to come together and push for change. The election can serve as a focal point for expressing discontent, and opponents can take advantage of the electoral setting to overcome collective action problems and initiate more anti-regime protests and unrest during the election year (Shirah, 2016). Scholars have found that authoritarian states with regular elections often attract more anti-regime social unrest during the election year (Knutsen, Nygård and Wig, 2017). Therefore, while incumbents in democracies need to wield their power in economic policy to signal the voters and gain an advantage in the competitive election, incumbents in electoral authoritarian states often face immense pressure in maintaining social stability near the elections.

Secondly, an election year inherently poses a risk for autocratic leaders, suggesting even the faintest possibility of a shift in power dynamics. While it's common practice for these leaders to manipulate election outcomes to ensure a favorable result, no system is foolproof. There remains an ever-present, albeit often minuscule, risk of the election veering off the intended trajectory. Given the unpredictability of such events, an autocratic leader must be exceptionally vigilant. It becomes imperative to curtail any external influences that might sway public sentiment or voting behavior. Among these influences, foreign cultural products stand out, as they

can inadvertently introduce alternative worldviews or spark unexpected sentiments among the populace. Therefore, in the lead-up to an election, there's a heightened incentive for autocratic leaders to limit or control the dissemination of these cultural imports to maintain a firm grip on the electoral outcome.

### **3.2 Optimal Strategy**

Thus, the optimal strategy for the autocratic leader is to strategically regulate the movie importation based on its content and based on their political stability. When they are politically unstable, such as when facing an election, autocratic leaders need to minimize the risk of film-induced uncertainty. They should actively reduce the number of movies with political content or themes that challenge their authority. This could involve implementing strict censorship guidelines or using regulatory bodies to scrutinize and selectively approve films for distribution. By doing so, they can effectively limit the exposure of their citizens to potentially provocative or dissenting viewpoints.

Simultaneously, to mask their intervention in movie importation, autocratic leaders may place greater emphasis on allowing continuing importing of films that focus primarily on entertainment, such as action, comedy, or romance genres. These types of movies generally pose little threat to the regime's stability and can help create a perception of media freedom and diversity. Lighthearted and entertaining foreign movies can distract citizens from pressing social issues or political grievances, directing their attention towards leisure and relaxation instead. The strategic regulation can help strengthen the incumbent's domestic control and bolster their public image.

In periods of political stability, autocratic leaders often possess greater confidence and security in their rule. With fewer threats to their power and control, these leaders may feel more at ease, leading to a relaxation of certain restrictions and raise the bar of what's deemed "sensitive" in terms of content. By doing so, they permit movies that previously might have been deemed politically sensitive to enter the market. This could be a strategic move on their part for a number of reasons. Firstly, allowing such movies could be seen as a gesture of openness and liberalization, even if only superficially, which could foster a sense of goodwill among the populace. Secondly, by controlling the extent of this openness, these leaders can still ensure that the primary narrative remains in their favor. Thirdly, exposure to varied content, albeit limited, can act as a safety valve, providing an outlet for citizens to vent, discuss, and ponder upon societal issues without resorting to more extreme forms of dissent.

Thus, my hypotheses are:

H1a: Autocrats are more likely to restrict the import of politically sensitive movies in election years than in non-election year.

H1b: Autocrats are likely to allow the continued import of non-politically sensitive movies during election years.

### **3.3 Mechanism**

The decision-making of autocratic leaders, especially around election years, is significantly influenced by the potential risks they face during elections. To delve deeper into these underlying mechanisms, I examine the varying levels of election competitiveness. There are two primary risks associated with elections for these

leaders: the possibility of social unrest and the slim yet present chance of them losing power. Both risks amplify when faced with a competitive election. I defined the competitiveness level simply by utilizing whether they would allow the opponent to participate. When autocratic leaders permit opposition parties or candidates to participate, it is not merely a change in the names on the ballot. Rather, it represents a profound alteration in the very nature of the political process.

When given a legitimate platform, this opposition can serve as a focal point, amalgamating various dissenting factions under a single banner. By doing so, they address one of the most significant challenges that disparate opposition groups face: the collective action problem. Fragmented groups often struggle to coordinate their efforts due to individual interests, lack of trust, or simple logistical issues. However, an endorsed opposition can streamline these groups, giving them a shared purpose and direction. It would increase the chance of social chaos, which would motivate the incumbents to utilize all resources to prevent sudden changes in the social atmosphere. Regulating the importation of foreign cultural products, such as movies, would be one way to serve the purpose.

Additionally, the presence of a competitive election introduces greater unpredictability in election outcomes compared to those elections where opposition participation is restricted. When autocratic leaders permit opposition parties or candidates to participate, it is not merely a change in the names on the ballot. Rather, it represents a profound alteration in the very nature of the political process. By permitting opponents to partake, autocratic leaders shift the odds of them losing from an absolute zero to a tangible possibility. This shift prompts these leaders to strategically deploy resources to prevent abrupt shifts in citizen behavior. Exposure

to foreign films, for instance, can instigate changes in citizens' viewpoints and preferences. As a result, controlling the influx and content of movies becomes a tactic to ensure a consistent ideological alignment among the populace. Thus, my second hypothesis is:

H2: Autocrats are more likely to restrict the import of politically sensitive movies in years with competitive elections.

## 4 Data and Methodology

### 4.1 Data on Elections

To test my hypothesis, I analyzed the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) dataset, which provides information on all elections in autocratic countries (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). The NELDA dataset provides detailed information on national elections in 193 countries from 1945 to 2020, including executive, legislative/parliamentary, and constituent assembly elections (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). The constituent assembly election happened much less frequently than the other two types of election. So I excluded them in the sample. But my results are consistent when using the full sample dataset to investigate. The dataset includes records for the type, timing, regularity, number of opposition candidates allowed, and economic condition of the country during the election for all elections included in the data (Hyde and Marinov, 2012).

I included only regular elections in the sample, taking advantage of the exogenous timing of elections. The timing of regular elections is determined before the actual election year, providing an exogenous setting to test the political cycle pattern in the foreign information control area of the incumbent autocracy. Even though there

is a small chance for the autocratic regime to reschedule the election because of the movie release, an election that can easily change the time and location also indicates a strong manipulation of autocratic leaders. There are a total of 119 elections that have changed times or dates. My results are consistent when using the full sample of data.

I used the Polity IV dataset's POLITY2 score to identify autocratic countries with scores below +6. The POLITY2 score is a comprehensive index for the regime authority spectrum that ranges from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to 10 (consolidated democracy). I excluded autocracies that don't hold national elections (such as China) or don't have regular elections from the sample. In electoral autocracies, elections are often used to imitate democracies and earn international recognition. While most election results are manipulated to justify the continuity of the incumbent, some autocracies allow opposition party candidates to run. The NELDA data also contain information on whether opposition parties are allowed to participate in elections.

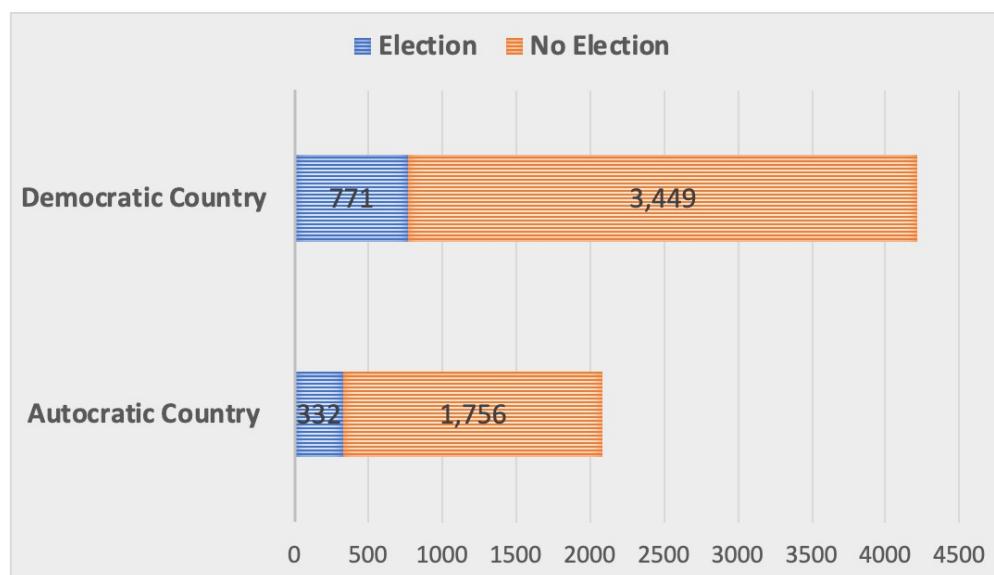
Electoral authoritarians and weak democrats drive my estimation sample. Electoral authoritarians and weak democrats are countries that have the appearance of a multi-party democratic system at both local and national tiers while, in reality, rendering elections ineffective. Those countries are also more likely to strategically regulate the information flow to maintain the appearance of medium freedom and simultaneously shelter their citizens from negative information.

In total, there are 57 autocratic countries and 70 democratic countries. There is an inevitable overlap between the two groups because regime types are determined at the country year level. Some countries would have regime change between autocratic countries and democratic countries. The elections that are held right after



regime change are counted as irregular elections and thus are excluded from the estimating sample. Figure 1 presents the number of election years for both autocratic and democratic countries in the sample. The estimation sample comprises 332 election years and 1678 non-election years for autocratic countries, as well as 713 election years and 2574 non-election years for democratic countries, spanning from 1945 to 2020. In the estimation sample, only elections that are regularly held with exogenous time settings are included. Irregular elections are not part of the dataset. Countries that never hold any national elections are excluded from the estimation sample.

Figure 1: Figure 1: Elections In Estimated Sample



Source: *National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy Dataset (NELDA)*

## 4.2 Data on Movie Releases

To gather movie data, I have manually collected information on 113 political protest movies produced from 1919 to 2020 from the Internet Movie Database(IMDb).

I also collected information on 167 family-romance movies produced between 1922-2020 to serve as a comparison dataset with less politically sensitive content. The dataset provides detailed information on box-office performance, production specifics, and release dates across 135 countries. The release dates and formats are specific to country-year level.

To categorize movies, I employed the content-keyword search function available on IMDb Pro. This tool enables users to curate a list of movies relevant to a specific keyword entered. For instance, by inputting "political protest" in the content-keyword search, I was able to generate a list specifically for political protest movies. Similarly, by searching for "family romance," I produced a list for family romance movies.

For movies tagged under "political protest", audience-generated keywords frequently encompass terms like "political demonstration," "politics," and "political activist." Such keywords suggest that the theme of political protests is either central to the movie's plot or forms an essential backdrop. These films are inclined to incorporate political-related content, such as notable events, or portray intense scenes often associated with mass demonstrations.

Conversely, family romance movies, as indicated by audience-generated keywords, often revolve around themes like "Summer Romance," "Teenage," and "Christmas." Such descriptors suggest that family romance movies are less inclined to delve into political nuances or showcase intense sequences. The top 150 key words for political protest movies and family romance movies are attached at the appendix.

In total, there are 113 political protest movies and 167 family romance movies. Table 1 offers descriptive statistics regarding the transmission of these movies. Each

political protest movie, on average, is transported to 32 countries, with the median being 35 countries. The highest reach for a single political protest movie is 63 countries, and the median number of such movies imported by a country in a year stands at 2. In contrast, family romance movies show a wider distribution. On average, a family romance movie is transported to 47 countries, with the median distribution covering 49 countries. The most extensive reach observed for a single family romance movie is 88 countries. However, the median number of family romance movies imported by a country in a given year remains consistent at 2, mirroring that of political protest movies. These statistics hint at a similar transmission trend for both genres. Although family romance movies are transmitted to more countries overall, on an annual country-specific level, the importation rates for both genres are comparable.

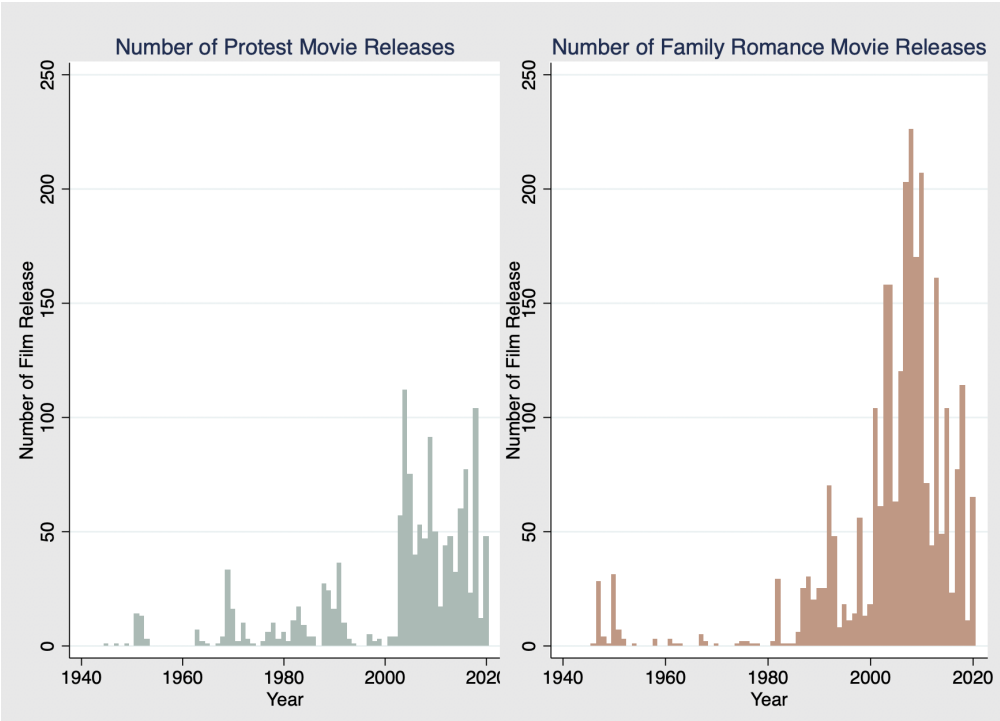
Table 1: Statistic Description of Movie Transmission

		Min	25%	50%	75%	Max	Sd
Political Protest Movie	Transmission	1	20	35	45	63	16.26
Political Protest Movie	Country	1	2	2	3	1	1.64
Family Romance Movie	Transmission	1	31	49	66	88	25.5
Family Romance Movie	country	1	1	2	4	10	1.66

Figures 2 chart the total number of movie releases for political protest movies and family romance movies, respectively, spanning from 1945 to 2020. A conspicuous uptrend in releases for both genres emerges post-2000, correlating with advancements in filmmaking technology, especially the advent of digital cameras and Digital Single-Lens Reflex (DSLR) cameras. Such technological leaps have invigorated the pace of movie production and consequently, their release.

It's notable that family romance movies enjoy greater popularity in terms of annual releases compared to political protest movies. Drawing from transmission statistics, one can infer that family romance movies enjoy a broader geographical penetration, finding audiences in more countries than their political protest counterparts. This suggests that while a family romance movie might seamlessly find its way into multiple nations in a given year, a political protest movie might encounter barriers to entry in those same locales.

Figure 2: Number of Movie Releases from 1945 to 2020



Source: Author-collected dataset from imbd.com.

### 4.3 Main Estimation

To delve into the regulation behavior of countries regarding movie importation during election years, I employed a negative binomial regression model with fixed

effects. My analyses will bifurcate into two distinct estimations: one focusing on the importation of political protest movies and the other on the importation of family romance movies. I expect autocratic countries to decrease the importation of political protest movies during election years to decrease the election-imposed downside risk for autocratic leaders. At the same time, to maintain an appearance of media freedom and avoid public criticism, I expect that autocratic countries would not interfere with the importation of family romance movies during the election year. The following is my estimation model:

$$NumofMovies_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 ElectionYear_{it} + \beta_2 Autocratic_{it} + \beta_3 Autocratic * Election_{it} + \beta_4 Control_{it} + e_{it}$$

The dependent variable,  $NumofMovies_{it}$ , represents the number of movies imported by country  $i$  in the year  $t$ . In the two estimation models, the dependent variables are the numbers of foreign political protest movies and foreign family romance movies, respectively. Additionally, I employ the total box office figures for each movie type as another outcome variable. These box office numbers provide insights into the consumption levels of both types of movies. The independent variable,  $ElectionYear_{it}$ , is a dummy variable indicating whether there are any types of elections being held in country  $i$  in year  $t$ . The main election types include presidential election and legislative election. The variable  $Autocratic_{it}$  is a dummy variable indicating whether country  $i$  is an autocratic country in year  $t$ . I use the POLITY 2 score to decide a country's regime. If a country has a polity 2 score below 6, it would be identified as authoritarian. Since my sample only includes the autocratic regime that holds regular national elections, the autocratic category would capture mostly the weak democrats and electoral authoritarians.

$Autocratic * Election_{it}$  is the interaction term between the election year and the autocratic country. I anticipate a divergent impact of elections on movie importation between autocratic and democratic nations. This stems from the premise that the downside risks associated with elections are less pronounced in democracies with robust institutions. Control variables include media freedom, GDP growth, population, education level, trade percentage and unemployment level. Media freedom would capture the general level of domestic information control of a country. GDP growth, trade percentage and unemployment level would capture the general economic condition and economic openness of a country. Population and education level would capture the consumers characteristics. Control variables are compiled from various resources, including the World Development Indicator, the Maddison Project Database, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

## 5 Findings

### 5.1 Main Results

The subsequent tables showcase results pertaining to my first hypothesis. Table 2 examines the election's influence on the importation of political protest movies across different regime types. Model 1 uses the count of political protest movies imported at the country-year level as the dependent variable without incorporating any control variables. Model 2 takes the same dependent variable but introduces a set of control variables. Model 3, on the other hand, uses the logged total box office income from imported political protest movies at the country-year level, also with control variables included. All models account for both country and year fixed

effects.

The outcomes reveal that in election years, autocratic countries tend to reduce the importation of political protest movies when compared to their democratic counterparts. While the marginal effect of the election year on the importation trends in autocratic countries is modest, it still points to a mild negative influence.

Table 2: Effect of Election on Protest Movie Imports, 1945-2020

VARIABLES	(1) Movie Number	(2) Movie Number	(3) Movie Boxoffice
Election	0.039*** (3.33)	0.079*** (3.70)	0.557*** (3.19)
Autocratic Country	-0.028*** (-2.59)	0.092** (2.20)	0.820** (2.40)
Election*Autocratic Country	-0.050** (-2.43)	-0.096** (-2.03)	-0.729* (-1.90)
Media Censorship		-0.005 (-0.36)	-0.011 (-0.11)
GDP per capita(log)		-0.139*** (-3.17)	-1.418*** (-3.94)
Population(log)		-0.397*** (-5.13)	-3.456*** (-5.47)
Trade (% of GDP)		-0.001*** (-2.91)	-0.010*** (-3.01)
Unemployment		-0.004 (-1.54)	-0.039* (-1.72)
Constant	0.080*** (15.18)	5.374*** (6.08)	48.866*** (6.77)
Observations	6,308	2,706	2,706
R-squared	0.297	0.355	0.394
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Negative binomial regression coefficient estimates, with robust standard errors clustered by country. Robust t-statistics in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

Table 3 details the impact of election years on a country's importation of family romance movies. In Model 1, the results are based on the number of imported family romance movies at the country-year level, without control variables. Model



2 incorporates a set of control variables while considering the same measure. Model 3 evaluates the logged form of the total box office income from imported family romance movies at the country-year level, also with control variables included. All models account for country and year fixed effects.

From the presented data, it's evident that there is no significant disparity between autocratic and democratic countries concerning the importation of family romance movies during election years. Moreover, election years don't exhibit a significant marginal effect on the import patterns of family romance movies in autocratic nations. Both Tables 3 and 4 corroborate Hypothesis 1. This hypothesis posits that in election years, autocratic nations strategically curtail the importation of political protest movies, yet maintain a consistent inflow of family romance films.

Table 3: Effect of Election on Family Romance Imports, 1945-2020

VARIABLES	(1) Movie Number	(2) Movie Number	(3) Movie Boxoffice
Election	-0.020 (-0.98)	0.001 (0.03)	0.159 (0.70)
Autocratic Country	-0.116*** (-6.15)	0.221*** (3.36)	1.667*** (3.76)
Election*AutocraticCountry	-0.015 (-0.43)	-0.029 (-0.40)	-0.320 (-0.64)
Media Censorship		-0.072*** (-3.43)	-0.464*** (-3.30)
GDP per capita(log)		-0.155** (-2.23)	-1.086** (-2.32)
Population(log)		-0.568*** (-4.66)	-4.330*** (-5.27)
Trade (% of GDP)		-0.001* (-1.87)	-0.011*** (-2.62)
Unemployment		-0.014*** (-3.25)	-0.080*** (-2.73)
Constant	0.269*** (29.12)	7.445*** (5.34)	55.838*** (5.95)
Observations	6,308	2,706	2,706
R-squared	0.524	0.599	0.581
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Negative binomial regression coefficient estimates, with robust standard errors clustered by country. Robust t-statistics in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

## 5.2 Mechanisms Results

To further discern whether it's the downside risk introduced by elections that underpins the results for autocratic leaders, I categorize elections into two types: competitive and non-competitive. Competitive elections are those that permit op-

ponents to participate, while non-competitive elections are those that exclude any opposition participation. In autocratic regimes, non-competitive elections virtually guarantee favorable outcomes for incumbents. In contrast, competitive elections not only present opponents who can unify various dissenting factions under a unified front but also introduce increased uncertainty in election outcomes.

Table 4 delineates the import patterns of political protest movies during different election types. Model 1 showcases the importation of political protest movies during competitive elections, while Model 2 does the same for non-competitive elections. The results indicate that the pattern of movie regulation in autocratic nations is predominantly influenced by competitive elections. It is the inherent uncertainties associated with competitive elections that prompt autocratic leaders to strategically re-calibrate their movie import controls.

Table 4: Effect of Election Competitiveness on Protest Movie Imports, 1945-2020

VARIABLES	(1) Protest Movies	(2) Protest Movies
Competitive Election	0.080*** (3.73)	
Autocratic Country	0.091** (2.17)	0.073* (1.79)
Competitive*Autocratic Country	-0.092* (-1.84)	
Non-Competitive Election		-0.056 (-0.23)
Non-Competitive* Autocratic Country		0.035 (0.14)
Media Censorship	-0.005 (-0.35)	-0.005 (-0.37)
GDP per capita(log)	-0.139*** (-3.16)	-0.137*** (-3.10)
Population(log)	-0.398*** (-5.14)	-0.402*** (-5.18)
Trade (% of GDP)	-0.001*** (-2.91)	-0.001*** (-2.85)
Unemployment	-0.004 (-1.53)	-0.004 (-1.54)
Constant	5.376*** (6.08)	5.410*** (6.11)
Observations	2,706	2,706
R-squared	0.355	0.351
Year FEs	Yes	Yes
Country FEs	Yes	Yes

Notes: Negative binomial regression coefficient estimates, with robust standard errors clustered by country. Robust t-statistics in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .

## 6 Conclusion

This paper examines the regulation pattern of movie importation among autocratic countries. Utilizing a novel movie releases dataset, the study demonstrates that due to the downside risks associated with elections, autocratic leaders are more likely to reduce the importation of political protest movies during election years. Concurrently, in an effort to maintain a semblance of media freedom, these leaders tend not to interfere with the importation of family romance movies. It is particularly the elections allowing opposition participation that drive this pattern. Competitive elections, which permit the opposition to participate, not only offer the opposition a legitimized platform to voice dissent but also introduce even slight chances of the autocratic leader losing power. These potential threats motivate autocratic leaders to regulate sensitive information, limiting foreign movies from entering the domestic market during election years. However, they continue importing non-sensitive movies to deflect public criticism about information control.

The findings of this study illuminate how autocratic leaders navigate the intricate balance between curtailing potentially disruptive information and upholding an appearance of media freedom, especially concerning movie imports. By testing two hypotheses on the variation of movie releases in autocratic regimes, this research reveals the strategies autocrats employ to maintain social stability while portraying media diversity.

This paper enriches the existing literature on the information control of autocratic regimes by incorporating aspects of cultural product globalization. While much of the prevailing literature focuses solely on domestic news, this study rec-

ognizes that, in an era of deepening globalization, autocratic leaders must grapple with the influx of foreign information. Moreover, this paper enhances the literature on the effects of globalization by spotlighting an often-neglected service sector. While many studies deduce conclusions about norm distribution in globalization by examining manufacturing goods, this research offers insights derived directly from globalized informational products.

# Appendix

Figure 3: Heterogeneity Effect Within Legislative Elections

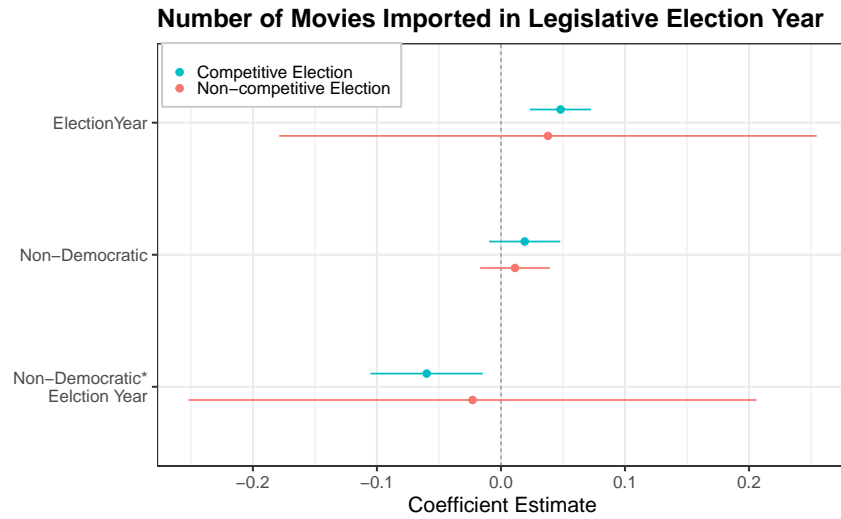
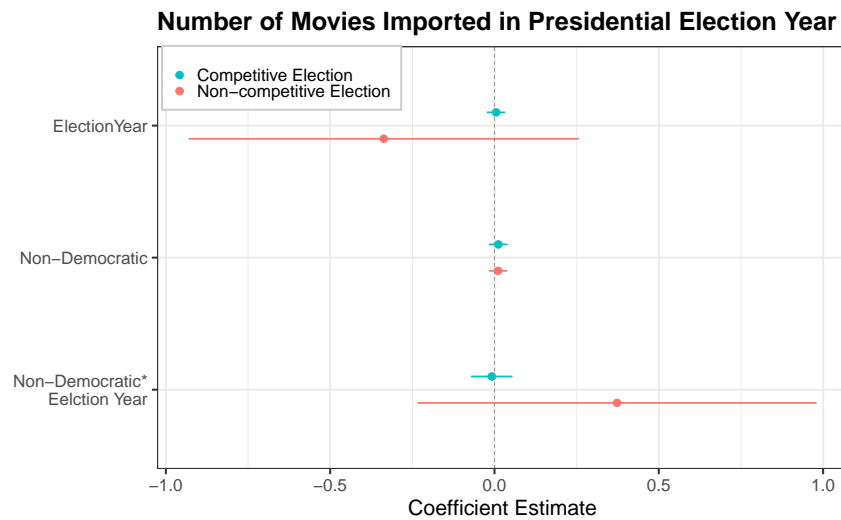


Figure 4: Heterogeneity Effect Within Presidential Elections







## Autocratic Countries

Albania  
Argentina  
Austria  
Azerbaijan  
Bahrain  
Bangladesh  
Bolivia  
Bosnia-Herzegovina  
Brazil  
Bulgaria  
Burkina Faso  
Chile  
Colombia  
Costa Rica  
Croatia  
Cyprus  
Democratic Republic of Vietnam  
Ecuador  
Egypt  
France  
Georgia  
Ghana  
Greece  
Hungary  
India  
Indonesia  
Iran  
Italy  
Kazakhstan  
Kenya  
Kuwait  
Lebanon  
Malaysia  
Mexico  
Nigeria  
Oman  
Panama  
Paraguay  
Peru

Philippines  
Poland  
Portugal  
Romania  
Russia  
Saudi Arabia  
Singapore  
South Africa  
South Korea  
Spain  
Sri Lanka  
Syria  
Thailand  
Turkey  
Ukraine  
Uruguay  
Uzbekistan  
Venezuela

## Democratic Countries

Albania  
Argentina  
Australia  
Austria  
Bangladesh  
Belgium  
Bolivia  
Brazil  
Bulgaria  
Burkina Faso  
Canada  
Chile  
Colombia  
Costa Rica  
Croatia  
Cyprus  
Czech Republic  
Denmark  
Ecuador  
Egypt  
Estonia  
Finland  
France  
Georgia  
Ghana  
Greece  
Hungary  
India  
Indonesia  
Ireland  
Israel  
Italy  
Japan  
Kenya  
Latvia  
Lebanon  
Lithuania  
Luxembourg

Macedonia (FYROM)  
Malaysia  
Mexico  
Netherlands  
New Zealand  
Nigeria  
Norway  
Panama  
Paraguay  
Peru  
Philippines  
Poland  
Portugal  
Romania  
Russia  
Slovakia  
Slovenia  
South Africa  
South Korea  
Spain  
Sri Lanka  
Sweden  
Switzerland  
Syria  
Thailand  
Turkey  
Ukraine  
United Kingdom  
United States of America  
Uruguay  
Venezuela

<b>Political Protest Movies</b>	<b>Year</b>
1971	2014
13th	2016
American Harvest	2008
Anarchy TV	1998
Another World Is Possible	2001
Battle in Seattle	2007
Before Stonewall	1984
Bei xi mo shou	2015
Berkeley in the Sixties	1990
Body of War	2007
Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin	2003
Bye Bye Birdie	1963
Campaign of Hate: Russia and Gay Propaganda	2014
Carlo Giuliani, ragazzo	2002
City of Borders	2009
Colonia	2015
Conventioneers	2005
Day of the Flowers	2012
Day Zero	2007
Dear Comrades!	2020
Democracy à la Maude	1998
Detropia	2012
Deutschland im Herbst	1978
Diaz - Don't Clean Up This Blood	2012
Even the Rain	2010
Fahrenheit 9/11	2004
First Man	2018
Fish Out of Water	2009
FTA	1972
Gabeira	2017
Gabriel Over the White House	1933
Gandhi	1982
Guerrilla: The Taking of Patty Hearst	2004
How to Start a Revolution	2011
Hunger	2008
I Am Not Your Negro	2016
Improvvisamente l'inverno scorso	2008

In the Heights	2021
In the Year of the Pig	1968
Indignados	2012
Iruvar	1997
J'veux du soleil!	2019
L'an 01	1973
Leipzig im Herbst	1990
Lekcja białoruskiego	2006
Les amants réguliers	2005
Lettera aperta a un giornale della sera	1970
License to Drive	1988
Mai 68	1974
Maidan	2014
Medium Cool	1969
Monsenor: The Last Journey of Oscar Romero	2011
Mourir à 30 ans	1982
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington	1939
My Queen Karo	2009
Nicht fummeln, Liebling!	1970
Old Dogs	2009
On the Line	2007
Patu!	1983
Peppermint Soda	1977
Praise Marx and Pass the Ammunition	1970
Pussy Riot - A Punk Prayer	2013
Putin's Games	2013
Rang De Basanti	2006
Ray	2004
Rebel Hearts	2021
Red Kiss	1985
Red Salute	1935
Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping	2002
Roger & Me	1989
Running on Empty	1988
Sa kabila ng lahat	1991
Selma	2014
Soy Cuba	1964
Sparkle	2007

Summer Palace	2006
Sunrise over Lake Van	2011
Suspiria	2018
Sweet Smell of Spring	2016
The 8th	2020
The Antifascists	2017
The Birth of a Race	1918
The Chairman	1969
The Company You Keep	2012
The Corporation	2003
The Day the Earth Stood Still	1951
The Double Life of Véronique	1991
The Dreamers	2003
The Edge of Heaven	2007
The Final Cut	2004
The Future of Emily	1984
The Kleptocrats	2018
The Life of David Gale	2003
The Russian Soul	2014
The Term	2014
The Three Deaths of Marisela Escobedo	2020
The Trial of the Chicago 7	2020
The Trial: The State of Russia vs Oleg Sentsov	2017
The U.S. vs. John Lennon	2006
The War at Home	1979
The Weather Underground	2002
The Wild Scene	1970
The Young Victoria	2009
Trumbo	2015
Underground	1976
WAAhsinn - Der Wackersdorf-Film	1986
Wackersdorf	2018
We Were Here	2011
Winter Soldier	1972
Within Our Gates	1920
Year of the Gun	1991
Z	1969
Zima, ukhodi!	2012

<b>Family Romance Movies</b>	<b>Year</b>
16-Love	2012
A Beautiful Star	2017
A Castle for Christmas	2021
A Christmas Prince	2017
A Christmas Prince: The Royal Baby	2019
A Cinderella Story	2004
A Kid in King Arthur's Court	1995
A Majority of One	1961
A Snow White Christmas	2018
A Spaceman in King Arthur's Court	1979
A Wrinkle in Time	2018
Against a Crooked Sky	1975
Agent Cody Banks	2003
Aladdin	1992
Andy Hardy Steps Out	1942
Annie14	2014
Annie82	1982
Aquamarine	2006
Azur & Asmar: The Princes' Quest	2006
Beauty and the Beast	1991
Beauty and the Beast 3-D	1991
Bedknobs and Broomsticks: 25th Anniversary	1971
By the Light of the Silvery Moon	1953
Carrossel 2: O Sumi-Ãsô de Maria Joaquina	2016
Cheaper by the Dozen 2	2005
Christmas Gift	1949
Christmas Makeover	2016
Christmas in the Clouds	2005
Christmas in the Smokies	2015
Christmas on the Carousel	2021
Cinderella15	2015
Cinderella21	2021
Cinderella50	1950
Country Crush	2016
Cupid for Christmas	2021
Curly Top	1935
Daytime Shooting Star	2017
Double Date	2017
Double Furlough	1945
Dudes in the 10th Century	2003
Emerald Green	2016
Enchanted	2007

Epic	2013
Explorers	1985
Falling for Grace	2006
Father Is a Bachelor	1950
FernGully: The Last Rainforest	1992
Finding Your Feet	2018
Fireheart	2022
Freaky Friday	2003
FusÃ©: Memoirs of a Huntress	2012
Get Me to the Wedding on Time	2022
Girl Flu.	2016
Hairspray	1988
Hannah Montana: The Movie	2009
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	2009
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	2007
Heidi	1937
High School Musical 3: Senior Year	2008
His	2021
Holes	2003
Hollywood Stargirl	2022
Homeward Bound II: Lost in San Francisco	1996
Houseboat	1958
How Green Was My Valley	1941
I Am Still Young	2017
I Can Only Imagine	2018
I'll Be Home for Christmas	1998
In Your Dreams!	2016
It's a Wonderful Life	1946
Ivory Heart	2012
Jasmine Women	2004
Julie	1956
Legend of Bravestarr	1988
Listen, Darling	1938
Little Princess	1939
Little Women33	1933
Little Women49	1949
Little Women94	1994
Lost & Found	2016
Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa	2008
Manuelita	2000
March of the Wooden Soldiers	1934
Married Life	2008
Middleton Christmas	2020

Mischief Night	2006
Modra	2010
Mom, Murder & Me	2014
Munster, Go Home!	1966
My Favorite Martian	1999
My Girl 2	1994
Oliver & Company	1988
Out of This World	2022
Pocahontas95	1995
Prom	2011
Return to Treasure Island	1954
Rock It!	2010
Rodeo & Juliet	2015
Ruby Red	2013
Runaway Christmas Bride	2017
Sandor slash Ida	2005
Santa Girl	2019
Sapphire Blue	2014
Shark Tale	2004
Shrek	2001
Son of Lassie	1945
Spirit Untamed	2021
Stardust	2007
Stowaway	1936
Sweet Agony	1999
Swiss Family Robinson	1960
Tall Girl	2019
Tangled	2010
That Christmas Movie	2018
The Beat Beneath My Feet	2014
The Boy with the X-Ray Eyes	1999
The Christmas Candle	2013
The Christmas Dance	2021
The Courtship of Eddie's Father	1963
The Croods	2013
The Croods: A New Age	2020
The Fure Fure Girl	2008
The Girl Who Leapt Through Time	2007
The Girl on the Broomstick	1972
The Glass Slipper	1955
The Haunted Mansion	2003
The Insanely Sad Princess	1968
The Jungle Book	1994

The Karate Kid	2010
The Last Keepers	2013
The Light in the Forest	1958
The Little Mermaid <sup>89</sup>	1989
The Moon-Spinners	1964
The Parent Trap	1998
The Perfect Holiday	2007
The Princess Bride	1987
The Princess Diaries	2001
The Princess Switch	2018
The Princess Switch 3	2021
The Princess Switch: Switched Again	2020
The Princess and the Frog	2009
The Proud Stallion	1962
The Rascal	1994
The Santa Clause 2	2002
The Search for the Castaways	1962
The Slipper and the Rose: The Story of Cinc	1976
The Thief and the Cobbler	1995
The Toll of the Sea	1922
The Trial	2014
Thomas Kinkade's a Joyous Christmas	2008
Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Mac	1965
Tom & Jerry	2021
Tom Thumb	1958
Tooth Fairy	2010
Toys	1992
Turtle Tale	2015
Up in the Attic	2009
Vintage Model	1992
Wall-E	2008
What a Girl Wants	2003
Where the Road Runs Out	2014
White Fang 2: Myth of the White Wolf	1994
Wild Prairie Rose	2016
Wolf Children	2012
Yell for the Blue Sky	2016
Yours, Mine and Ours	2005
Zoom	2006



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