Argo and *Zero Dark Thirty:* Film, Government, and Audiences

Michelle C. Pautz, *University of Dayton*

ABSTRACT With the prevalence and accessibility of film today, we must wonder how film affects its audience. In particular, how does film influence an audience's perceptions of the government? Regardless of the content, research demonstrates that film has the power to shape perceptions of its moviegoers on a range of subjects. In this study, two recent films, *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, were chosen as case studies to explore how Hollywood portrays the intelligence community in film and shapes opinions about the government more broadly. This research found that about 25% of viewers of the two films changed their opinion about the government after watching one of the movies. Additionally, many of those changes are reflected in an improvement in the sentiments about the government and its institutions. This exploratory research provokes interesting discussions about the ability of film to influence the perceptions of an audience.

Film has proven its endurance as arguably the most accessible form of art for Americans. Movies invite audiences to engage in stories that range from the terrifying to the futuristic to the dramatization of significant events in history. Watching a movie occupies our senses more than any other form of art, particularly when we experience it at the local Cineplex. Regardless of the content, a film has the power to shape perceptions of moviegoers on a range of subjects from love and marriage to the work of the government (cf. Franklin 2006; Kolker 1999; Ortega-Liston 2000; Riggle, Ellis, and Crawford 1996). A frequent subject on the silver screen is the government, yet our understanding of its influence is limited. Recent scholarship examined the portrayal of the government in aggregate in the movies and found that it is a common subject in films (cf. Pautz and Roselle 2010; Pautz and Warnement 2013). However, this research does not explore the influence of a particular film on an individual viewer. Indeed, if film has such a significant influence on an audience, what is that influence? With regard to the government on the silver screen, does this influence improve an audience's perspective, keep it the same, or make it worse? These were the questions guiding this research.

With its prevalence and accessibility today, how does film affect an audience's perceptions of the government? Two recent films, *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, were chosen as case studies to explore how Hollywood portrays the intelligence community and influences opinions about the government more generally. This narrowed focus allowed us to investigate how significant events in US history—the extraction of Americans during the Iranian hostage crisis and the hunt for Osama bin Laden—are portrayed in film and what, if any, influence these films had on audience perceptions about these events and the government more generally. Both films were contenders for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Award for Best Picture (i.e., the Oscar) in 2013; *Argo* won, arguably, the film industry's most sought-after award.

Although this exploratory research is limited because of the study participants, the analysis in this article demonstrates that from 20% to 25% of viewers changed their opinion on a variety of questions about the government after watching one of the films. The research also found that much of the change reflects an improvement in those opinions, which is interesting after viewers spent only two hours watching one movie. Viewers also reported that after watching the films, their knowledge of the film's focal events increased; this is significant because both films take considerable liberties with the actual events.

Before exploring in greater detail what the data reveal about the influence of these two films, the article considers the influence of film on an audience and the scope of that audience. It then examines the two films selected for study as well as the methodology used to ascertain the influence of viewing them. Finally, the discussion includes a thorough review of the data and their implications.

THE ABILITY OF FILM TO INFLUENCE AN AUDIENCE

The millions of people who watch movies every year go to the cinema for a multitude of reasons—from the awkward first date to the escape from reality to the sheer comedic value. However, perhaps unconscious to most of viewers is the realization that

Michelle C. Pautz *is associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton. She can be reached at mpautzl@udayton.edu.*

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film is likely to influence their attitude and perception about numerous topics. Several studies have documented that narrative forms, including film, can shape our perceptions (cf. Kolker 1999). For instance, in terms of social issues, Wilson et al. (1992) found that media exposure to social ills, such as rape, helps to educate and change viewers' attitudes. Riggle, Ellis, and Crawford (1996) discovered that media exposure influences opinions about homosexuality. Furthermore, many studies have found that violent programming increases the aggression of viewers (cf. Geen 1994; Geen and Thomas 1986; Roberts and Maccoby 1985).

Film also influences our perception of various professions and categories of individuals in society. For example, Miller (1999), among others, concluded that film conveys negative and inaccurate depictions of journalists and public relations professionals. Furthermore, Franklin (2006) maintained that movies can influence an audience's perception and behavior regarding political culture; Ortega-Liston (2000) made a similar argument about views on the government more generally. It is important that whereas film may contribute to these opinions and stereotypes, it is by no means the only influence on those viewpoints. Nevertheless, although the scope and magnitude of that influence is debatable, the presence of film's influence on an audience's perceptions is not.

The ability of film to influence the perceptions of an audience may be explained in two ways. First, film influences perceptions because of its ability to provide information and pseudo-experiences, particularly in the absence of an individual's own experience (Miller 1999). Stated differently, if members of an audience have no direct experience with the work of bomb technicians, then their notion of how they operate and their demeanor might come from watching a film. This explanation of the influence of film is in line with conclusions of various scholars, including Baecker (1996) and Mazur and Emmers-Sommer (2002), who reminded us that film—despite being fictional—represents reality. Film also provides a medium for social learning (Bandura 1994).

Second, the ability of film to give an audience a pseudo-experience comes from the all-encompassing experience of watching it. Unlike other art forms, film has the ability—particularly in the cinema setting—to engross the audience and to comprehensively capture the senses of sight and sound. "The visual image is encompassing, immersing. It allows for the total suspension of disbelief…" (Holzer and Slater 1995, 77). Furthermore, "[o]f the arts, the cinematic experience is among the most psychologically persuasive" (Lee and Paddock 2001). Films that take place in outer space provide a good example of this dimension. Because only a minute fraction of Americans are either astronauts or involved in the space program, space travel is unknown to most. Yet, there is an array of films set in outer space—from the historical (e.g., *Apollo 13*) to the contemporary (e.g., *Gravity*) to the futuristic (e.g., the *Star Trek* films)—that provide audiences with a glimmer of what it is like to travel in space. These films enable a pseudo-experience because they represent reality—at least to a certain degree.

Building on the point of representing reality, film both reflects and exaggerates reality. "It is in the nature of fiction depicted on film that it plants its seed in a ground of truth which the viewer can identify" (Holzer and Slater 1995, 83). Stated differently, films typically are grounded in reality and then dramatize or enhance those dimensions to provide an entertaining experience. Thus, whereas it is highly unlikely that average moviegoers will ever face a catastrophic chain of events depicted in a film that takes place in outer space, the viewers still feel like they have an understanding of what it would be like if the series of events happened to them. It is through this representation of reality that moviegoers can witness history, understand seminal world events, and learn about other cultures. Regardless of whether these representations are accurate and whether they should be examined, films help audiences to see a certain version of reality—and therein lies the tremendous ability of film to influence perceptions. Part of the reason that film has this ability to influence is related to the scope of cinema attendance.

Scope of the Audience

Some of the explanation for the influence of film is in the size of the audience. Film continues to be the most accessible form of art, reaching a significant portion of the population (Cook 1996; Sklar 1994; Vogel 1998). The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) notes that the global box office for films worldwide in 2012 was $34.7 billion, which is an increase of 6% from the previous year (MPAA 2012). More specifically, in the United States and Canada,[1] box-office receipts in 2012 increased about 6% from the previous year to $10.8 billion, with more than 1.36 billion admissions to the cinema, which reversed the downward trend of previous years (MPAA 2012).

Other entertainment venues would be hard-pressed to achieve the numbers experienced by the film industry. In 2012, theme-park admissions were at 359 million and attendance at professional sporting events was at 131 million (MPAA 2012). Additionally, more than two thirds of the American and Canadian populations—68% or 225 million—went to the movies at least once in 2012 (MPAA 2012). This is further evidence of the ability of the cinema to attract a sizable audience. It is also worth noting that young people aged 12 to 24 continue to be the most frequent moviegoers; this is important because young people are more likely to be engaged in and susceptible to a variety of influences during the formative years of their political socialization.

ARGO AND ZERO DARK THIRTY

Within this contextualization, we now examine two recent films—*Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty*—and their application to the preceding discussion about the ability of film to influence an audience. Each film depicts a key event in American history that prominently demonstrated the role of the nation's intelligence community. Both films were released within months of one another: *Argo* in October 2012 and *Zero Dark Thirty* in January 2013 (Internet Movie Database 2013).

Film influences perceptions because of its ability to provide information and pseudo-experiences, particularly in the absence of an individual's own experience.

Argo

Argo chronicles the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to extract six employees of the US State Department

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hiding in Tehran during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980. Specifically, the plot centers around real-life CIA analyst Tony Mendez (portrayed by Ben Affleck, who also directed the film), who is tasked with devising an extraction plan to get the government employees—who have been hiding at the Canadian ambassador's residence—out of Iran before the Iranians realize that there are State Department workers unaccounted for inside the besieged US Embassy. Central to Mendez's plan is the cover story that he is a Hollywood producer scouting locations in Iran for a soon-to-be-made science-fiction movie. The six Americans he is trying to evacuate are part of the film's crew—from screenwriters to location managers. Although the outcome of successfully extracting the Americans is known before watching the movie, the film dramatizes Mendez's efforts. The film is based on a true story, but artistic liberties certainly are taken. The film's budget was estimated at $44.5 million; it was quite successful at the box office, taking in almost $20 million during the opening weekend and grossing more than $136 million (Internet Movie Database 2013).

Argo was nominated for numerous awards and won key industry prizes in 2013. Most significantly, *Argo* won the Best Picture Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as well as awards for Best Adapted Screenplay and Film Editing. It also won Golden Globe awards for Best Picture and Best Director. By most accounts, the film was a commercial and critical success.

Zero Dark Thirty

Another film that was in competition with *Argo* for many of the same awards was *Zero Dark Thirty*, which chronicled the hunt for the Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, the film depicts the search for bin Laden by focusing on CIA analyst Maya (portrayed by Jessica Chastain). With her counterparts, Maya spends a decade following intelligence leads, fighting government bureaucracy, and convincing skeptical superiors of the need for resources and other assets to find bin Laden. Initially, we might presume the film is primarily about the raid on bin Laden's Abbottabad compound; however, the film depicts grueling hours of studying grainy footage of intelligence assets, unsettling interrogations, and the trials and tribulations of intelligence analysts' work. The efforts of SEAL Team 6 are portrayed only in the waning minutes of the film. Similar to *Argo*, this film's ending is especially known to the audience because it was released in early 2013 and portrays events that occurred less than two years before. The film cost a reported $40 million to make and was successful at the box office, but it garnered criticism for the explicit depiction of enhanced interrogation practices of detainees in the war against terrorism. Indeed, some Hollywood notables and other leaders advocated a boycott of the film because of these depictions. Ultimately, *Zero Dark Thirty* earned more than $95 million in global box-office receipts (Internet Movie Database 2013).

Zero Dark Thirty also received critical acclaim, as evidenced in numerous award nominations, including for 2013 Best Picture Oscar. The film earned one Oscar for sound editing. It also was nominated for several Golden Globe awards, and Jessica Chastain won for Best Performance by an Actress in a Drama. *Zero Dark Thirty* was a successful film but perhaps not to the same extent as *Argo*.

FILM SELECTION AND METHODS

With an interest in how film influences an audience, both *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are great selections. As mentioned previously, both films were released within months of one another in late 2012 and early 2013, and both were widely accessible films in terms of release, scale of production, and widespread marketing. Most important, both films chronicle the efforts of CIA civil servants during significant events in American history. In *Argo*, Tony Mendez orchestrates an impressive rouse in creating—with the help of Hollywood insiders—a faux production company and then uses it as cover to successfully get six Americans out of Tehran. Maya is the relentless CIA analyst in *Zero Dark Thirty* who invests years to track down Osama bin Laden and chase leads that none of her colleagues deems worthwhile. She demands resources to track an individual that she suspects is bin Laden's courier and finally convinces skeptical leaders in the CIA and the White House that she has found bin Laden. Her perseverance successfully brings to an end arguably the most significant manhunt in American history. Accordingly, the central character in both films is a government bureaucrat tasked with a seemingly impossible job in a highly volatile context—and both succeed.

It is important to note that it is impossible to control all of the factors that might have influenced a viewer's perceptions of the government.

Therefore, with the selection of these two films, the study was designed to determine whether watching the film had any influence on audience opinions about the government and the focal events. It is important to note that it is impossible to control all of the factors that might have influenced a viewer's perceptions of the government. Efforts were made to devise an appropriate quasi-experimental design in which audiences conveyed their opinions about the government, watched one of the two films, and then answered the same questions about their perceptions of the government.

For this initial research effort, audience participants were recruited from an undergraduate student population at a mid-size, private Midwestern university. Flyers and class announcements asked students to sign up to watch either *Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty* and to complete a questionnaire before and after viewing the film. Sixty-nine students attended the screenings, which were held in classrooms on campus during the fall of 2013. Given the topics and vivid depictions in these films—particularly the torture of detainees in *Zero Dark Thirty*—students self-selected which film they wanted to watch.[2] Several questions were repeated before and after viewing the film; some questions were asked immediately before and immediately after watching the movie.

Background of Study Participants

Before delving into the questionnaires and responses from students, a portrait of the viewers is provided here; they are what might be expected from the student body of a mid-sized, private institution. Slightly more than half of the participants, 55%, were female. The students represented a diverse range of majors, from the social sciences and humanities to engineering.

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About 25% were political science majors,[3] 10% were communications majors, 10% were prelaw students, and 10% were undeclared. Instead of asking viewers for their political-party identification, a proxy question was used regarding the role of government in society. Viewers were asked which of the following statements they agreed with more: (1) the government should do more to solve problems and help meet the needs of people, or (2) the government is doing too many things better left to individuals and businesses. Of the total viewers, 57% aligned with the statement that the government should do more, and 44% agreed that the government is doing too much.

In addition to background demographics, the pre-viewing questionnaire asked participants about their level of knowledge in current events and American history generally, as well as more specific questions about their understanding of the real-life event that their selected film chronicled. Somewhat predictably, the viewers indicated that they were, on average, moderately engaged in current events.[4] Only 3% of viewers stated that they were not engaged, whereas 13% ranked their engagement as high. It is interesting that the viewers self-reported higher levels of knowledge in American history than engagement in current events. Slightly more than half of all study participants (51%) ranked their level of knowledge in American history at a 4 on a 5-point scale.[5] An additional 12% of respondents stated that they were very knowledgeable about American history; a mere 3% stated that they were not. Again, these findings are not particularly surprising because students often are better versed in history due to the general education requirement of taking several history classes.

More relevant for the study were the questions that inquired about the level of knowledge of the event that the viewer's chosen film depicts prior to viewing. The students watching *Argo* were asked about their understanding of the Iranian hostage crisis; those watching *Zero Dark Thirty* were asked about the hunt for Osama bin Laden and the raid on his Pakistani compound. Based on their responses before watching the films, viewers claimed to be more knowledgeable about American history generally compared to their reported knowledge of the specific events.[6] However, viewers claimed to have knowledge of both events, but viewers of *Zero Dark Thirty* claimed more, on average, than their counterparts who watched *Argo*.[7] A higher reported level of knowledge in the hunt for Osama bin Laden was expected because the events transpired more recently than those associated with the Iranian hostage crisis. Viewers also were asked how significant they thought the specific event is to American history. More than half of the participants thought the specific event was either significant or very significant historically. Those study participants who were about to watch *Zero Dark Thirty* claimed that the focus of the film was more significant than those viewers about to watch *Argo*.[8] After watching the movies, viewers were asked the same questions about their level of knowledge; those responses are discussed in a subsequent section about the pre- and post-viewing comparisons. The levels of knowledge that the viewers claimed prior to watching are mentioned here to provide a better understanding of the study participants.

The participants in this research endeavor were by no means representative of a broad population; therefore, their opinions about the government and any effects of the films were not particularly generalizable. However, although this research was exploratory with a limited study population, it establishes a foundation from which to explore how films that depict the American intelligence community and significant historical events may or may not impact an audience. Using the methods and insights from this study, future research can be designed to better understand how films can affect the perceptions and attitudes of audiences.

OPINIONS ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT, INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY, AND KEY EVENTS

Before watching their selected film, study participants were asked a variety of questions about their opinions on the government and the direction of the nation as well as their assessment of various government institutions that deal with national security. After watching the film, the participants were asked the same questions to determine whether there was any discernible change in their opinions.

General Opinions about the Government

First, viewers were asked about their impressions of the government generally and film-relevant government institutions. The largest plurality of viewers, 48%, thought that the nation is headed in the wrong direction, whereas only 25% thought the country is headed in the right direction. After they watched the movie, there was a noticeable shift in responses to this question. As indicated in table 1, post-viewing, participants were more evenly split in their opinions about the direction of the country, with 38% stating that the country is headed in the right direction, 28% in the wrong direction, and 34% unsure.

This change in response in only a few short hours is interesting. Given current attitudes about the state of the country, it is unsurprising that such a large portion of this study population thought that the nation is heading in the wrong direction; however, it is noteworthy that the pessimism diminished considerably. Naturally, claims about the direct causality of movie watching and the effects on an audience cannot be made; nevertheless, these findings are noteworthy. Furthermore, 22% of viewers indicated an improvement in their opinion about the direction of the country after watching the movie, whereas 76% held the same view and only 2% noted a poorer assessment. Breaking down these data by the two films, 25% of *Argo* viewers reported an improvement in their assessment of the direction of the country, whereas only 18% of *Zero Dark Thirty* viewers reported the same. Perhaps the difference between the responses of the two film audiences can be explained in that *Argo* is a more upbeat film in which there is far less depiction of a "bad government" at work, whereas in *Zero Dark Thirty*, various government employees engage in questionable behaviors (e.g., torture and enhanced interrogation techniques). In other words, the depiction of the government in *Argo* may be simply a better view of it.

Table 1

Direction of the Nation

Assessment of Direction	Pre-Viewing Percentage	Post-Viewing Percentage
Right Direction	25%	38%
Unsure	28%	28%
Wrong Direction	48%	34%

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Follow-up questions inquired about viewers' levels of trust in the government. The majority of viewers both before and after watching the movie (51% and 60%, respectively) indicated that they trust the government most or just about all of the time. After watching the movie, however, there was some increase in trust levels among viewers, as reflected in table 2.

Because both films focus on activities of the intelligence community, study participants were asked about their level of trust in the government related to national-security issues. Here, the government fared somewhat better (table 3): 64% of viewers stated that they trust the government regarding national-security matters most of the time or almost always before watching the movie, and 75% stated the same afterwards. It is worth noting that the decline in those who responded that they trust the government only some of the time fell from 35% before to 25% after watching the movie.

For both questions, about 25% of the study participants indicated a higher level of trust in the government after watching the movie than their answer to the same question before watching it. There was some difference in the audiences for each film: for *Argo* viewers, 65% stated before watching the movie that they trusted the government in this area just about always or most of the time, whereas only 20% of the *Zero Dark Thirty* audience stated the same. Both audiences increased in trust after viewing the film: *Argo*'s audience reported an increase from 65% to 71% and *Zero Dark Thirty*'s audience reported an increase from 20% to 23%.

Table 2

Viewers' Trust in Government[9]

Level of Trust	Pre-Viewing Percentage	Post-Viewing Percentage
Just about always	3%	5%
Most of the time	49%	55%
Some of the time	46%	41%
Not at all	1%	0

Table 3

Viewers' Trust in Government Regarding National-Security Issues[10]

Level of Trust	Pre-Viewing Percentage	Post-Viewing Percentage
Just about always	12%	16%
Most of the time	52%	59%
Some of the time	35%	25%
Not at all	1%	0

Views of Specific Government Entities

After the general questions about views of the government, study participants were asked about specific government entities that were depicted to varying extents in the films. Table 4 is an overview of participants' responses about different views of each agency before and after viewing the film.

Generally speaking, film viewers had moderate approval ratings in aggregate for the specific government entities. The US military had the strongest support of the film audiences both before (90%) and after (85%) they watched the films, whereas the president and the White House had the weakest support. The CIA, the US State Department, and the military were overwhelmingly thought of in excellent or good terms; only the president and the White House had weaker support, with 49% of respondents indicating a fair rating. Perhaps what is most interesting, however, is the change observed in these opinions after study participants watched either *Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty*.

We now consider each government entity in turn. Before watching the films, 72% of viewers had an excellent or good opinion of the CIA. After watching either movie, those figures increased to 86% of viewers rating the agency as either excellent or good. Of the *Argo* viewers, 34% recorded an improvement in their assessment of the CIA, whereas only 17% of *Zero Dark Thirty* viewers did so. In *Argo,* Tony Mendez and the CIA work diligently to get the US State Department employees out of Iran; although Mendez encounters what might be deemed "typical bureaucratic headaches," the CIA is shown as capable and ultimately successful. The CIA's depiction in *Zero Dark Thirty* is less positive. Although the CIA tracks down Osama bin Laden, it is successful at a significant cost. The film opens with scenes of enhanced interrogation techniques that immediately leave the audience wondering what is and is not appropriate. Numerous analysts burn out and some even lose their life in pursuit of bin Laden. Finally, many of the CIA superiors appear to want to focus the agency's efforts on more tangible threats that can be contained to project a good political image.

For both questions, about a quarter 25% of the study participants indicated a higher level of trust in the government after watching the movie than their answer to the same question before watching the movie.

Compared to the CIA, the US State Department received a more positive assessment from viewers before watching the films; however, although its favorability improved after participants watched the movie, it did not improve to the same extent as opinions of the CIA. Before watching the movie, 74% of viewers rated the State Department as excellent or good; 78% did so after watching the movie. About a fifth—19%—of the viewers of each film indicated an improved view of the State Department after watching a movie. The State Department features less prominently in both films. In *Argo*, the people trapped in Tehran are US State Department employees, but that is the extent of what audiences see of the Department; in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the State Department comprises only a minor part of the film.

The US military had the highest approval ratings both before and after watching the movie than any other government entities. Before watching the movies, 90% of viewers reported either an

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Table 4

Opinion of Various Government Entities Pre- and Post-Viewing

Opinion	CIA		US State Department		Military		President and White House	
	Pre	*Post*	*Pre*	*Post*	*Pre*	*Post*	*Pre*	*Post*
Excellent	14%	30%	6%	14%	33%	47%	1%	3%
Good	58%	56%	68%	64%	57%	38%	36%	41%
Fair	26%	11%	25%	19%	10%	16%	49%	45%
Poor	1%	3%	1%	3%	0	0	13%	11%

excellent or a good opinion of the military. It is interesting that after watching the movies, 85% expressed the same opinions, thereby reflecting a decline in the previously mentioned approval ratings. Overall, 13% of study participants expressed a more negative opinion of the military after watching *Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty*, which is the largest percentage decrease for any of the government entities surveyed.

Although opinions about the military are the most positive among the specific government agencies, the military's approval had the biggest decline post-viewing. These observations might be explained by the content of both films. In *Argo*, the military is unable to produce an extraction plan for the US State Department officials hiding at the Canadian embassy in Tehran; it is a CIA operative who successfully orchestrates the extraction. Furthermore, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, although SEAL Team 6 conducts the mission that results in the death of Osama bin Laden, it is the work of the CIA—and notably one persistent analyst—that provides the necessary intelligence to find the Al-Qaeda leader. In both films, the military seems to take a backseat to the work of the civil servants in intelligence agencies.

Finally, the president and the White House had the lowest approval ratings of the four government entities. Before watching either film, 37% of viewers had an excellent or a good opinion of the president and the White House; after watching, those figures increased to 44%. Nearly 80% of viewers retained their opinion of the White House after watching; only 17% had an improved opinion and 5% reported a poorer opinion. Because the White House was not prominently featured in either film and many people have entrenched opinions about the presidency, these figures are unsurprising.

Knowledge and Significance of Focal Events

In addition to general opinions about the government and specific government agencies, study participants were asked about their assessment of the film's focal events. The level of knowledge about key events portrayed in the films was discussed previously; however, this section more fully explores the before and after assessments. As indicated in table 5, viewers' self-assessment of their level of knowledge of the focal event changed after watching the film, in both expected and unexpected ways. On a 5-point scale, viewers were asked to rank their level of knowledge in the event pre- and post-viewing.

As might be expected, viewers generally reported that they had more knowledge of key events after watching the movie. Of course, because both films take liberties with the actual events being portrayed, this knowledge may or may not be comprised of entirely accurate information. Comparing viewers' responses pre- and post-viewing, 43% increased their knowledge assessment after watching the film; 40% reported the same level of knowledge pre- and post-viewing. These figures are unsurprising. After watching a movie about most topics, viewers reasonably conclude that they have greater knowledge than they did before watching. Perhaps most interesting, 17% of viewers indicated that they actually knew less about the central event after than before watching the movie. Viewers may have realized that the focal events were actually far more involved than they initially thought; therefore, this percentage may demonstrate their realization that they know less than they originally thought.

Related to the level of knowledge about the film's subject, viewers also were asked the significance of the event pre- and post-viewing. As shown in table 6, the majority of viewers did not change their assessment of the film's focal event.

Table 5

Knowledge Assessment Pre- and Post-Viewing

Level of Knowledge	Pre-Viewing	Post-Viewing
1 Not Knowledgeable	18%	2%
2	27%	21%
3	24%	35%
4	24%	33%
5 Very Knowledgeable	7%	10%

Table 6

Event's Significance Assessment Pre- and Post-Viewing

Significance	Pre-Viewing	Post-Viewing
1 Not Significant	4%	2%
2	10%	11%
3	34%	26%
4	28%	31%
5 Very Significant	22%	30%

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Viewers rated their responses on a scale of 1 to 5 in which 1 represented not very significant and 5 indicated very significant. These findings were expected. Prior to watching the film, 50% of viewers thought the event was significant; after viewing, 61% thought so. A side-by-side comparison of viewers' responses pre- and post-viewing indicated that 67% did not change their assessment of the film's significance, 27% increased their significance assessment, and only 7% decreased their assessment. Before watching these films, many viewers reasonably may have thought that the subject matter was important because a film was made about it; these conclusions may be reflected in the assessments. After watching a dramatized version, it is plausible that viewers would find the events even more significant.

After watching *Argo*, viewers reported a considerable increase in their assessment of the focal event's significance compared to viewers of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Before watching *Argo*, the average assessment of the significance of the film's key event was 3.13; after watching, the average assessment increased to 3.68. In comparison, viewers rated the significance of the hunt for bin Laden at 3.78 before watching *Zero Dark Thirty* and 3.85 after. Therefore, viewers of the latter film demonstrated that the event was more significant compared to their counterparts watching *Argo*, but viewers of *Argo* demonstrated a more significant change. Because the hunt for Osama bin Laden concluded in 2011, it is not surprising that viewers thought the event was very significant, and the film seemed to do little to change that view. However, the hostage situation in Tehran took place before these viewers were born, and their assessments of its significance were muted—as might be expected. It is interesting, however, that watching *Argo* seemed to have a demonstrable effect on viewers.

Views of the Government

Finally, after watching each movie, viewers were asked to describe how the government was portrayed. They were asked how the government was depicted in the movie overall by choosing among the following descriptors, with the option to write in their own: efficient, inefficient, competent, incompetent, good, bad. Study participants could choose as many or as few descriptors as they felt appropriate. Of the total viewers, 52% thought the government was depicted positively in the film, 32% reported a mixed depiction, and only 16% reported a negative depiction. Reviewing these figures categorized by film, a different picture emerges. Table 7 captures the overall depiction of the government in each of the two films.

As reflected in table 7, a majority of viewers thought *Argo* generally presented the government in a positive manner; only 11% thought the depiction was negative. By contrast, the assessment of the government in *Zero Dark Thirty* was more divided. In that film, 39% of viewers found the government depicted positively and another 39% thought it presented a mixed depiction; only 21% thought the government was depicted negatively. These data show that the depiction of the government in *Zero Dark Thirty* is less clear to its audience, especially compared to the *Argo* audience.

Table 7

Overall Depiction of the Government

	Argo	*Zero Dark Thirty*
Positive Depiction	63%	39%
Mixed Depiction	26%	39%
Negative Depiction	11%	21%

Changes in Opinions Pre- and Post-viewing

A central inquiry of this research was to determine whether there is any change in viewers' opinions before and after watching either film. Overall, about a quarter of the film audiences in this study changed their opinions after watching either film. This may not appear to be a significant change but consider that watching one film for a few hours resulted in changes of the viewers' opinions—imagine how a several films might affect opinions. Table 8 shows the percentage of viewers who changed their opinion about various questions after watching one of the films.

As discussed previously, there is evidence that films can influence audiences, and this research found support for those claims. More specifically, the study participants reported the most change in their opinions of the US military and general levels of trust in the government. Of these changes in opinions, most of the shifts were to more positive opinions of the government. For instance, of those viewers who changed their assessment of the direction of the nation, 22% improved their outlook; with regard to trust in the government, 25% of all respondents reported improvement after watching one of the films. Views on the president were the least likely to change after watching the film; however, 22% of viewers still changed their opinion post-viewing. More research with a larger sample would enable further analysis to determine the extent of this influence. Taken together, all of these findings lend support to broader discussions in the literature about the effect of film viewing on audiences.

ARGO, ZERO DARK THIRTY, AND THEIR AUDIENCES

Although this research was limited in terms of its study population, several discussion points could inform conversations about the effects of movies on audiences and guide future research. The comparison of both films provides additional insights about (1) the time between the real-life event and the film's depiction of it; (2) the necessary attributes and conventions of the film medium on narratives; and (3) the depiction of the government on film, which may not be as negative as initially thought—at least in these two films.

Timeline

The time period and event depicted in the film, as well as the time in which the film is made and viewed, could produce effects on movie audiences. A feasible argument may be made that the older the event, the less an audience remembers or is familiar with it beyond what may be taught in school. As a result, the film may be more capable of influencing perceptions. The passage of time frequently clouds memories about the details of an event and how that event may impact opinions about the government, for instance. If we barely remember the complexities of a situation and how we responded to it when it occurred, the impact on opinions may be subtler. Moreover, if we were not yet born when seminal events occurred, our ability to connect with and be influenced by them is more difficult. For example, a woman who was

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Table 8

Changes in Opinions Pre- and Post-Viewing

Question	Percentage of Viewers with Different Opinions after Viewing
In general, do you think things in the nation are headed in the right direction or wrong direction?	25%
How much do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?	31%
How much do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right when it comes to handling national-security issues?	27%
How would you rate the job being done by the CIA?	30%
How would you rate the job being done by the US State Department?	25%
How would you rate the job being done by the military?	33%
How would you rate the job being done by the president and the White House?	22%

a product of the Great Depression may have a deep distrust for banks in a way that her grandchildren may never fully understand.

It can be argued that the effects of time are evident in the films studied here. *Argo* depicts a crisis that occurred more than 30 years ago and the participants in this study had not been born during the actual event. *Zero Dark Thirty* portrays recent events in which the majority of study participants were old enough to be cognizant of them. Accordingly, it may be more difficult for a film to influence viewers who are more familiar with a particular event that is fictionalized for the silver screen than a film that depicts events that occurred decades ago. Stated differently, if an audience is largely unfamiliar with the focal event, or it has been many years since the real-life event occurred, the film may be more influential on an audience's recollection and characterization of the event. There are preliminary indications that this argument can be substantiated in this research, but more focused research on this question is needed as well as a larger sample of films that depict historical events.

are all rescued and the government even allows Canada to claim credit for their extraction to ensure the success of the operation. The American government is the protagonist and the Iranian government, which is trying to capture the Americans, is the antagonist. Furthermore, although Mendez encounters bureaucratic hassles while implementing his plan to extract the workers, the American government does what is necessary, demonstrating competence and commitment to task. The contrast is considerable with the depictions in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Although most Americans would struggle to find sympathy for Osama bin Laden, good and evil are not as easily distinguishable in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The opening scenes of the film depict enhanced interrogation techniques—as some viewers might characterize them, or torture to others—that leave the audience pondering what is and is not morally acceptable. Additionally, the personal struggles of various characters in the CIA about what is acceptable depict a more muddled picture of the agency and, by extension, the government. Stated differently, the contrast between good and bad is more difficult to discern in *Zero Dark Thirty* even though Maya's quest to find bin Laden is ultimately achieved. The effects of film conventions are evident in this research because *Argo* elicits more positive sentiment from the audience.

...if the "good guys" and "bad guys" are easier to discern, films might be able to influence audiences.

Narrative Film Conventions

Another supposition from this research is related to the necessary components of film as a medium for storytelling. Films that have a more distinctive characterization of characters and institutions may have a greater influence on viewers. Stated differently, if the "good guys" and "bad guys" are easier to discern, films might be able to influence audiences. Given the confines of the medium—the narrative form, the timeframe, and the economic considerations—films tend to simplify stories and reduce plots and characters to more one-dimensional depictions. As a result, moviegoers often are engrossed in stories that are constructed to work on the silver screen, observe allotted time limits, and appeal to audiences. These stories frequently depict obvious protagonists and antagonists in terms of both individual characters and institutions; moreover, stories conducive to this medium often have definitive good and evil elements. This simplification is evident in both films considered in this study.

Arguably, *Argo* is a film that demonstrates the capabilities of the American government and its intelligence community, and it conveys clear patriotism—the US State Department employees

Depiction of the Government

The preceding discussion also might inform broader conversations about how the government is depicted on the silver screen. Film is one of many factors that contribute to the political socialization of citizens. When considering how the government fares in film, it is easy to conclude that movies portray it negatively, just as public opinion reflects (cf. Pautz and Roselle 2010). However, the reality may be more complex. Most Americans have what could be described as a love–hate relationship with the government, and that complexity extends to film. Pautz and Warnement (2013), building on the work of Pautz and Roselle (2010), concluded that although general depictions of the government are negative, individual government characters generally fare well in movies. The present study substantiates that conclusion.

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In both *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, it would be easy to see the failings of "the government" and the "bloated bureaucracy" in the core of each film's story. In *Argo*, the US State Department could be held responsible for its inability to protect its employees, even in the volatility of Iran at that time. Additionally, due to bureaucratic issues, the Canadians ultimately claimed credit for the work of the American government in rescuing the workers. Although Tony Mendez is portrayed well, his success with the task at hand is largely a result of confronting the complacent bureaucrats in his agency's hierarchy. Accordingly, this film shows a dysfunctional government that seems to achieve its objectives only through the work of an exceptional and dedicated civil servant.

Similarly, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, negative images of the government are presented. Maya is determined to stay on the trail of Osama bin Laden even though the CIA is largely deprioritizing the chase in an effort to focus on more tangible—and therefore more politically palatable—pursuits. In the film, the audience routinely sees Maya challenging the system to pursue her objective. Again, the audience sees the government depicted negatively—or, at best, meeting typical expectations—while the work of a committed and passionate civil servant brings success in the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

Therefore, both films generally portray the government as lackluster at best and reliant on the hard work of a few lone civil servants. They support the conclusions that films generally show the government in a negative light whereas individual government characters fare better (cf. Pautz and Roselle 2010; Pautz and Warnement 2013). These portraits in film further substantiate the claims of Goodsell (2004), among others, that we are bombarded with negative images to the point that we have a poor opinion of the government, despite any personal experiences. Of course, more research is needed—not only case studies but also larger-scale studies based on a wide sample of films—to solidify any conclusions of this type.

The case studies of *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty* provide an initial exploration of how two recent films portray the intelligence community on film. The films generally portray the two central government characters as hard-working and determined civil servants who persevere in a system that often stifles their efforts. Both films represent key events in the nation's relatively recent history. Furthermore, this research provides a basis on which to argue about the influence of film on audiences, and it should compel future research on this art form that is readily accessible to many Americans—particularly young people who are engrossed in the most formative years of their political socialization. ■

NOTES

1. Data on only US box-office receipts are not available from the MPAA because the breakdown of its data for the United States and Canada is grouped together.
2. Allowing students to select which film they wanted to watch was also part of the Institutional Review Board approval.
3. A significant number of political science majors is unsurprising because the author is a member of the political science department and the heaviest recruiting was in political science courses.
4. Viewers were asked to rate their level of engagement in current events about the government on a 5-point scale, with 1 representing not engaged and 5 representing very engaged. The mean was 3.239, with a standard deviation of 1.074.
5. On a 5-point scale, respondents were asked to rate their level of knowledge about American history; the mean was 3.657, with a standard deviation of 0.845.
6. On a 5-point scale, respondents were asked to rate their level of knowledge about American history; the mean was 3.657, with a standard deviation of 0.845. On a 5-point scale, with 5 indicating high knowledge and 1 indicating no knowledge of their film's significant event, viewers had an average rating of 2.761, with a standard deviation of 1.220.
7. The mean knowledge value that viewers of *Argo* reported was 2.54, whereas the mean knowledge value that viewers of *Zero Dark Thirty* reported was 3.00.
8. Study participants who were about to watch *Argo* reported a mean score on a significance scale of 1 (not significant) to 5 (very significant) of 3.31; participants who were about to watch *Zero Dark Thirty* reported a mean of 3.78 on the same scale.
9. Viewers were asked before watching the film: How much do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right: just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or not at all?
10. Viewers were asked before watching the film: How much do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right when it comes to handling national-security issues: just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or not at all?

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