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### Making the Myth: The Racialized Legacy of Voter Fraud in St. Louis, Missouri

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# MAKING THE MYTH: THE RACIALIZED LEGACY OF VOTER FRAUD IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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This thesis examines a prominent example of the “myth of voter fraud” from the November 2000 election in St. Louis, Missouri and evaluates its ongoing political, legal, and cultural ramifications for voters of color. In the twenty-first century, voter fraud has been proven as virtually nonexistent across the United States. Despite this evidence, a divisive partisan debate over the purported threat of illegal voting still shrouds American elections, now motivating state-level legislation that—under the guise of protecting electoral integrity—often serves to limit the voting abilities of minority voters. In this thesis, I examine the cultural and political legacy of modern limitations on African-American voting access in order to reveal how the myth of voter fraud was created and made believable in St. Louis. In the first chapter, I demonstrate how misadministration and institutional bias from the St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners resulted in the disproportionate removal of African-American residents from the city’s voter registration rolls. However, the realities of this disenfranchisement were later obfuscated by a partisan narrative of voter fraud that emerged in the wake of a controversial election cycle. I then examine the falsity of these voter fraud rumors in the second chapter, identifying three critical, racially-influenced factors that made accusations of fraud in St. Louis appear plausible. In the final chapter, I analyze legislative and judicial responses to this voter fraud myth, specifically focusing on the legal battle over Missouri’s 2006 voter identification law. While the law was ultimately deemed unconstitutional, I demonstrate how the Missouri Supreme Court’s failure to specifically acknowledge the suppressive effects that voter fraud accusations and photo identification legislation have on voters of color—a determination that has been both replicated and refuted across the country in the years since—represents a continuation of the United States’ legacy of African-American voter suppression. As the nationwide debate over the integrity of American elections and voter identification legislation continues, this thesis thus offers insight into how systemic racial biases still saliently animate the modern narrative of voter fraud.