

Good design, whether architecture, a logo, or a flag, captures our interest, and when done correctly, can constitute instantly recognizable symbols of a place. Thus, examining the choices we make for the symbols that represent our state is of paramount importance. As part of this, we must examine our state flag, which, upon close inspection, is aesthetically deficient.

To aid flag design critique, NAVA (the North American Vexillological Association) has compiled principles of good flag design by observing patterns in flags that were flown with pride by citizens, compared to flags which were all but unused (<https://nava.org/good-flag-bad-flag>). The first guideline is arguably the most important when evaluating designs: keep it simple enough that a child could draw it from memory. Simple shapes and patterns not only allow a flag to be recreated and recognized easily, but also reduce production costs. Similarly, the number of colors on the flag should be limited to ensure the flag is not too busy. In this manner, seals on flags must be avoided, as they are meant for close viewing on documents, where small details can be distinguished. However, on a flag, potentially flying hundreds of feet away, small details run together and can't be identified. While employing simplicity, one must also use meaningful symbolism that is widely recognizable by both residents and nonresidents. From this, we see that writing on flags is generally problematic, as writing what one wishes to represent on the flag defeats the purpose of symbols. Finally, a flag should be either distinct or intentionally and meaningfully related to other flags. Using similar design language across flags can imply connections, but designs become a problem once they are so similar that it is difficult for a non-expert to identify the flag.

The flag of Minnesota (Figure 1) fails every NAVA guideline. The design is not simple: no child could draw it from memory. Furthermore, the flag uses 7 colors, more than the three or four typically recommended, and contains a prominently placed seal. This overly complicated design obfuscates any symbolism the flag intends to convey. Writing "Minnesota" on the flag only makes the problem worse, as effective flags need not write the name of the region they represent to invoke their meaning. Finally, to the average person, Minnesota's flag is indistinguishable from 19 other state flags, all blue backgrounds with overly detailed state seals, shown in Figure 2.

In addition to violating the principles of good flag design, there exists definitive empirical evidence that the flag of Minnesota is not well-regarded compared to other state's designs. In a 2001 State and Provincial Flag Survey, NAVA hosted a poll on their website asking its members and the public about flag designs

in the U.S. and Canada. It lasted around three months, and around 100 NAVA members and 300 members of the public cast around 29,000 votes. The results (Figure 3) clearly demonstrate that seals, especially on flags with a blue background, diminish a flag's standing in the eyes of professionals and the public. Minnesota's flag ranks 67th out of 72 with a score of 3.1 out of 10. From this evidence, it is clear that the design of Minnesota's flag is insufficient when compared to established criteria for flag design.

Here in Minnesota, we've seen a recent successful example of the flag replacement process. In 2019, the city of Duluth held a public contest to redesign their city flag. 195 flag designs were submitted by 98 designers from 5 to 70 years old, from which a volunteer committee chose 9 finalists, which the public voted on. The Duluth city council adopted a new flag (Figure 4) in August of that same year. The new flag tends toward less cluttered iconography, yet the design, which symbolizes the natural features and beauty of Duluth, is instantly recognizable.

A number of individuals have already created new vexillologically sound designs for our state's flag (Figure 5). Many emphasize the beauty of Minnesota's land, and our identity as the North Star State. These flags all represent Minnesota and its people far better than our current flag, and constitute only a sample of Minnesotans' talent for flag design.