

THE AMERICAN CITY FLAG SURVEY OF 2004

Edward B. Kaye

Raven 9/10, American City Flags, documented the flags of the 100 largest cities in the United States, all 50 state capitals, and at least two cities per state, 150 flags in all. The book scrupulously avoided judgments of the quality of the designs.

However, NAVA members and many others have long decried the relatively poor level of city vexilligraphy in the United States. NAVA followed its "hands-off" scholarly effort on city flags with a "hands-on" survey of their quality, with spectacular results.

The American City Flag Survey

In 2004 NAVA hosted an Internet-based survey asking NAVA members and any visitors to rate the design qualities of the flags appearing in *American City Flags*. The survey ran on the NAVA website from May to September. We publicized the survey on the Flags of the World website, in *American Vexillum Magazine*, in *NAVA News*, and on the NAVA e-mail list. Responses came in from 66 NAVA members and 415 members of the public.

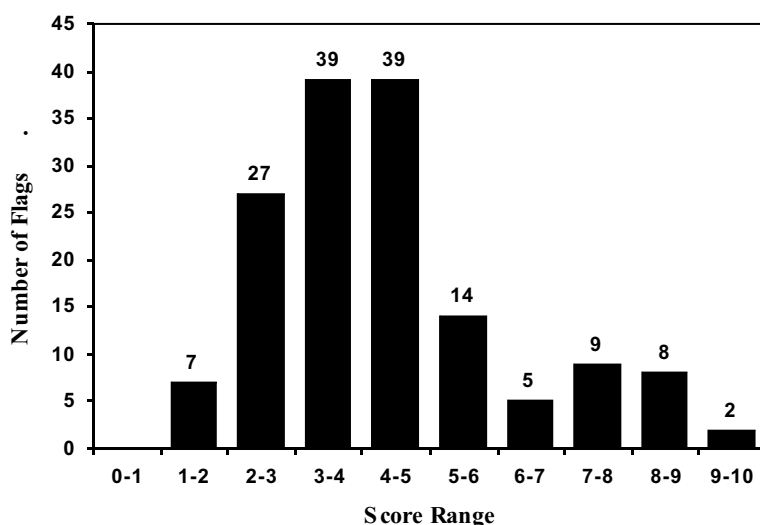
Participants rated the design qualities of the 150 flags on a 0-10 scale, with 10 points being the best score. The full-color image of each flag appeared on the website, nearly 5 centimeters high and in correct proportions.

The scores from NAVA members and public respondents were nearly the same, averaging 4.38 and 4.31. We reported the NAVA member scores to the press, and use them in this analysis.

The winners were simple, brightly-colored, and distinctive flags; the losers had complicated designs, city seals, or writing on them. The top three scores were around 9 points. But three-quarters of the city flags scored below 5 points. Seven flags received below 2 points.

This chart shows the distribution of scores, with more than half of the flags scoring between 3 and 5 points. Survey respondents could make comments as well as scoring flags.

Distribution of Scores



The following section reports the ten best and ten worst, along with their rankings, scores, and *actual* comments from survey respondents.

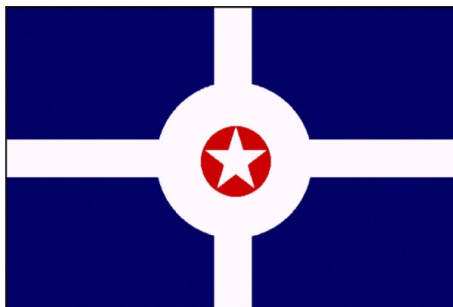
The Best:



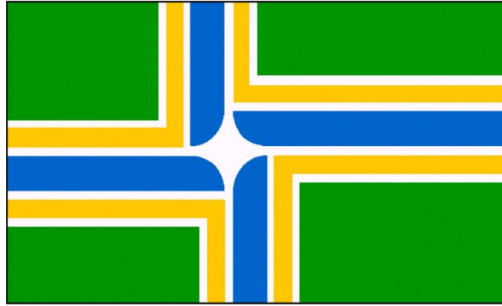
10 **Corpus Christi, Texas** (8.02)
“...simple, evocative, and distinctive.”



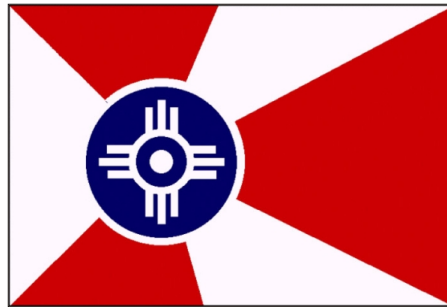
9 **Louisville, Kentucky** (8.11)
“I had no idea that Louisville, Kentucky had such a cool flag!”



8 **Indianapolis, Indiana** (8.35)
“Capital and town square effect works for me somehow.”



7 **Portland, Oregon** (8.38)
“Rock on. This one rules, in a Green/Nazi kind of way.”



6 **Wichita, Kansas** (8.41)
“Bummed off of New Mexico, granted, but it works even so.”



5 **St. Louis, Missouri** (8.56)
“Bravo! Good design, strong heraldic (and patriotic) colors, and it tells the history of the city!”



4 **Phoenix, Arizona** (8.65)
“Best...simple...interesting...the image tells you exactly which city it is.”



3 **Denver, Colorado** (8.86)

“The best flags are those that stick close to heraldic design.”



2 **Chicago, Illinois** (9.03)

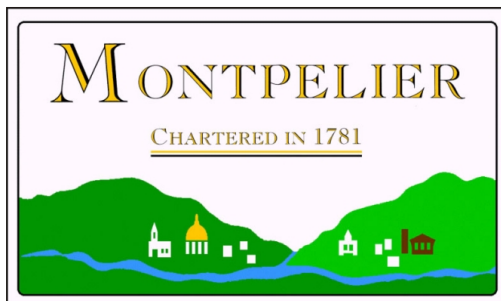
“...is the standard by which all US city flags should be judged.”



1 **Washington, DC** (9.17)

“I'd recognize Washington, DC's flag anywhere, which is how it should be.”

The Worst:



141 **Montpelier, Vermont** (2.35)
“...looks like a bumper sticker from the tourist office at least the landscape DOES resemble Montpelier.”



142 **Cedar Rapids, Iowa** (2.23)
“...looks like a cheap plastic banner ... (and they're such nice people, too).”



143 **Provo, Utah** (2.14)
“Cheap gas AND a wide assortment of snacks!”
“Is the rainbow flash under the diagonal "Provo" saying that the city is gay-friendly???”



144 **Lubbock, Texas** (1.92)

"Had the people designing it never seen a flag? The flag really deserves a negative score"
"Jesus Christ! Are you people on bad honky-tonk acid or something?"



145 **Hialeah, Florida** (1.85)

"I don't like seals, but crap, make it legible, at least."



146 **Mesa, Arizona** (1.73)

"Hey look! Gas is 3 cents less than in Provo! "Great People, Quality Service??"
"What the heck is that all about? Is that supposed to stir civic pride in Mesa residents?"



147 **Milwaukee, Wisconsin** (1.59)
“...is designing a new flag. That's fortunate, because right now it is waayyy too busy.”



148 **Rapid City, South Dakota** (1.56)
“Cities need to watch for poor contrasting colors. Yellow on white doesn't work ... difficult to read. A 'totally un-designed' flag.”



149 **Huntington, West Virginia** (1.50)
“The lack of unity wouldn't bother me if it weren't also ugly... This laughable and completely misconceived flag gets a raspberry.”



150 **Pocatello, Idaho** (1.48)
“I'd be proud to be from anywhere else.”
[Note the copyright notice AND the trademark "TM" symbol]

Survey Conclusions

The highest-scoring flags all embody the five basic principles listed in NAVA's flag-design guide, *Good Flag, Bad Flag*:

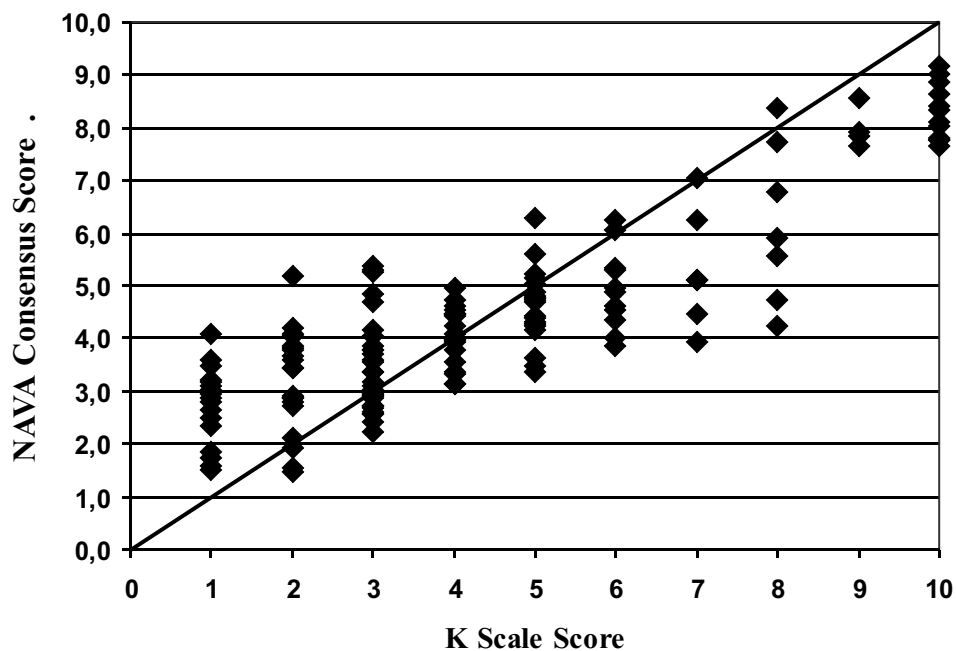
1. Keep It Simple
2. Use Meaningful Symbolism
3. Use 2-3 Basic Colors
4. No Lettering or Seals
5. Be Distinctive or Be Related

Mason Kaye has proposed a methodology converting these principles to scores in what he calls the "K Scale", awarding 0, 1, or 2 points for each of the five principles for a total of 0 to 10 points ("The Flags of Portland, Oregon 1916-2002", *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Vexillology*, Stockholm, August 2003, pp. 416 ff.). The results of the K Scale predicted the consensus scores with 89% accuracy.

That is, the survey's winners scored the highest on the K Scale, and the losers scored the lowest. The average difference between the K scale score and the consensus score was just 1.1 points.

The results of the survey represent a powerful validation of the principles in *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. The high correlation between the subjective survey results and the objective K Scale scores affirms that those five principles successfully capture the underlying criteria that respondents used to judge the flags.

The K Scale's Predictive Power



An analysis of the correlation shows that the data support a regression equation based on the K-Scale score. The survey scores can be predicted with this equation, which starts with a constant amount and weights the individual K Scale scores:

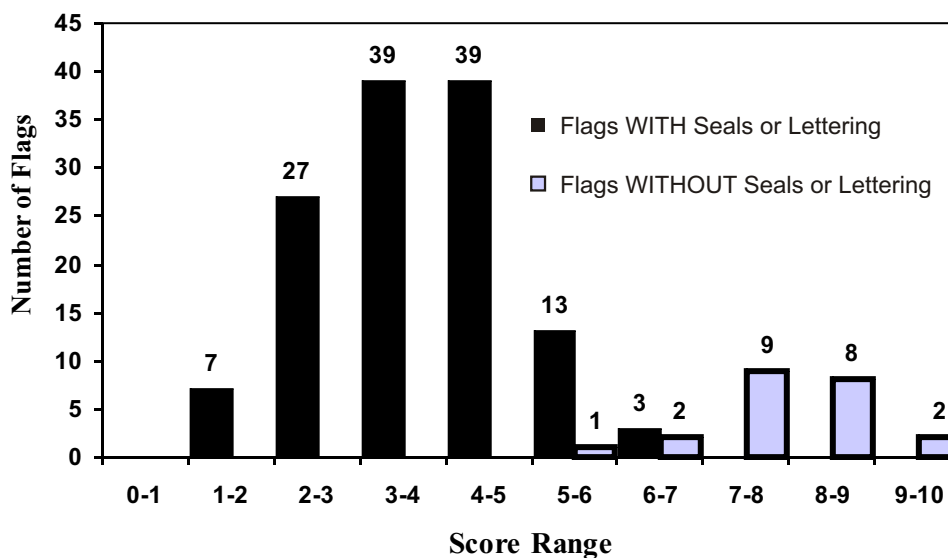
$$\text{Survey Score} = 2.25 + (0.41 * \text{Simplicity}) + (0.57 * \text{Symbolism}) + (0.16 * \text{Colors}) + (1.27 * \text{No Lettering-Seals}) + (0.54 * \text{Distinctiveness})$$

The equation results in an R-Square value of 83%, showing a very high correlation. The principle explaining the greatest variance was "No Lettering or Seals".

Confirming the regression analysis, nearly all of the top 20 flags received a K-scale score of 9 or 10. Only 22 of the 150 flags have no lettering or seals and these accounted for all of the top 20 flags. About 100 flags have a seal or a seal-like object on them; about 50 flags have lettering on them (beyond any lettering in a seal).

In fact, the overall results can be interpreted as two overlapping bell-shaped curves: one centered on 8 points, representing the 22 flags without lettering or seals, and a second centered on 4 points, representing the other 128 flags with lettering or seals.

Distribution of Scores—Two Curves



Comments from the public and NAVA members showed an understanding of the design issues and a sense of humor.

Some praised the good in city flags:

- It's nice to see that there are cities in the US which understand good flag design.
- The flags I liked the most were simple, evocative, and distinctive.
- I'm amazed how beautiful some city flags are.
- A good flag should be able to be identified without any writing on it.

Many others decried the bad:

- American city flags are, generally speaking, a disaster.
- A flag should be symbolic; if you have the name of the city written on it I think you've missed the point.
- There are a few of these that I doubt have ever been produced in cloth. Sadly, some have.
- Some flags are reason enough to keep flag burning legal; if I were in Pocatello or Provo, I'd buy up the entire stock of their flags and use them for winter heating!

Public Reaction

NAVA announced the results of the survey in October 2004. Local newspapers and TV & radio stations reported extensively, as it was a local story in every city. Over 100 cities had newspaper stories about their city flags, often on the front page. Many newspapers expressed surprise that their city had a flag.

Newspapers often referenced or excerpted *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, listing its five principles. One common angle was making fun of the word "vexillology" or of the existence of an organization dedicated to the study of flags.

City officials had varied responses. When the flags fared well, they were enthusiastic. When flags fared poorly (a much more common occurrence) officials usually either defended the flag or insisted they had higher priorities. But in some cases, officials were surprisingly open to change and improvement.

The official response in some cities was "That's not our flag!". In several cases the image in the survey was not what the city considered its flag (such as in Lubbock). Some cities (Fort Worth, Tallahassee, Louisville) had changed their flags since the book was published. Mesa's flag was really just an event banner; the city had no official flag. Other cities said that we'd used an older version of their flag (Garland, Springfield).

But some newspapers called for improvement. The Nashville newspaper ran a facetious contest for a new city flag which produced a winner. In Kansas City, the newspaper sponsored a contest which received 250 entries, and NAVA judges selected the winner. In Mesa, the newspaper's contest received 131 entries. Readers chose the winning design, which was adopted as Mesa's official flag.

Survey Outcomes

NAVA members and the public provided a broadly-based quantitative consensus regarding the design quality of city flags in the United States.

NAVA received a vast amount of exposure across the country through intensive press coverage (often on the front page) in two-thirds of the cities whose flags we surveyed. NAVA's website's "hits" jumped from 3,000 to a peak of 400,000 per day in October.

We increased people's awareness of their city's flags, of their flags' relative design quality, and of the study of flags in general.

The survey also validated the basic principles promoted by *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, giving NAVA a strong analytical foundation for its promotion and guidance of flag design.

The survey also inspired improvements, beginning positive change in many cities.

Conclusion

The consensus of the hundreds of people who participated in our survey: *A few very striking designs in a sea of tedium.* (Kaihsu Tai, United Kingdom)

There is a tremendous opportunity for improvement. Flag enthusiasts have a strong role to play in encouraging American cities to adopt better flags, armed with *Good Flag, Bad Flag* and the results of this survey.

As one survey respondent wrote: "If the results of this survey prompt a city to change a flag for the better, it will be worth it."



Edward B. (Ted) Kaye is editor of *Raven*, the scholarly journal of the North American Vexillological Association, and advisory editor of *The Flag Bulletin*. A member of NAVA since 1985 and an organizer of the 12th International Congress of Vexillology in San Francisco, he serves as the chief financial officer of a technology company in Portland, Oregon and as NAVA's treasurer. He compiled and published NAVA's guide to flag design "Good Flag, Bad Flag", and has led NAVA's Internet surveys of public perceptions of US and Canadian state/provincial flags and of US city flags.