

USA vs New Zealand: To what extent do their national flags represent their population?

For centuries now, national flags have been the means to represent kingdoms, countries, and societies. They are powerful symbols used to reflect the people who live under it, and the history of a sovereign state. National flags may be changed and altered following an important historical event, to more widely represent their population or their geopolitical roots. In this report, using the flags of the United States and New Zealand, I will assess to what extent both flags truly represent their population, and what may need to be changed in order for their people to feel more encompassed by their national flag. Two flags which have raised controversial opinions and political intrigue in the last few years, does the post-colonial 'Star Spangled Banner' still serve to represent the freedom and power of such a patriotic nation, or has it become a symbol of fear and oppression for ethnic communities. On the other hand, does the pre-colonial New Zealand flag give the sense of a nation still under the influence of colonial rule, and should the native Maori population be given some sort of recognition; or has the flag become too deep rooted in Kiwi culture for any flag alteration to be acceptable, as implied by the 2015 referendum?

In order to understand why the American flag has become such a compelling symbol, it is essential to learn of the flag's origins. During the American revolutionary war, ships that wanted to show they were no longer loyal to the king would stitch white lines on the background of the Royal Ensign. As a result the flag became a symbol of rebellion against colonial rule and a reminder to Americans that their ancestors were able to overcome British imperialism,



Star Spangled Banner

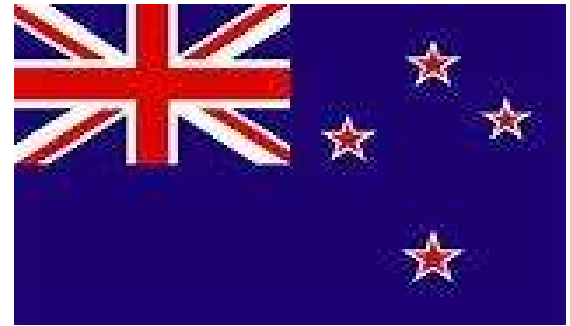
which was a large feat at the time, in order to found a country for the free and liberated, which would go on to be the biggest superpower of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The addition of a new star each time a new state joined the United States, is also a perfect example of how the flag is inclusive to every citizen, with not one star being more prominent than the other or holding more value, therefore meaning in theory that everyone should be treated with equality, and not one ethnic or religious group being made to stand out more than any other. Americans passion for their flag also stems from its use during the American Civil War, in support for the Union and in opposition to the Southern States. Immediately after the war, songs and anthems were written about the flag, the Star Spangled Banner covered the streets during processions in rejoice to the defeat of the south, resulting in the flag becoming a symbol of unification, as well as the population beginning to see the flag as not such a bunch of colours, but an emotional message of what their society stood for and the journey they had been to arrive at unification. Now in the present-day, Americans are just as, if not more, attached to the flag and the historical importance with which it holds, which in turn is why the United States is one of the most patriotic nations in the world. This is clear to see by the presence of the Star-Spangled Banner at people's houses, schools, sporting events, and churches. For politicians, the easiest way to prove you are a patriot, is by simply covering yourself in the American flag, such is the message of the flag to the people of the United States. The extent of how frequently used the flag is, is almost unlike any country in the world. For example, one may draw similarities to how in England, we love to dress ourselves, households, and public places in the St. George's Cross during the World Cup, as a result of the sense of pride and attachment we feel to our nation. However, in the USA, this can be seen during every part of the year, and refusing to wave the symbol above your household, may be even be

considered more of political statement than having one at all? John Hartvigsen, president of the North American Vexillological Association quoted, "our flag has become a symbol above politics. It is the symbol of that which unites us." Hartvigsen is suggesting that during the great triumphs in American history, at Iwo Jima in 1949 and the moon landing in 1969, as well as during the darkest of times of September 11th 2001, the flag has risen above the rubble to become their symbol of unity, unchanged since the nation's founding. Events such as these explain why Americans value the flag so highly, presenting its ability to unify a diverse nation of over 300 million, and has been present through thick and thin, outstanding other symbols such as the Bald Eagle and the Statue of Liberty, to offer citizens a sense of belonging and worth that cannot be matched by any other patriotic symbol. To conclude this section, the historic routes, usage of the flag, and unifying ability, all contribute to why the American flag represents its population arguably more so than any other nation.

The main counter argument to be discussed when arguing the validity of the flag as a good representation of its nation, is whether the flag has become a symbol of racism and discrimination towards ethnic minorities in recent decades. Chase Quinn, an African American writer based in North Carolina, tells of how the day after Trump was elected into power, he encountered a bloom of American flags during his morning run. However, for the first time ever, the emblem with which he grew up with seemed hostile, due to Trump's campaign for a 'new' America being endorsed by organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan, for his often nationalistic and racist approach. There is a fine line between patriotism and nationalism, which has been frequently crossed by Trump in his quest to, 'make America great again', and the flag has accompanied him in this, explaining why for Quinn and so many coloured Americans, the Star Spangled Banner is becoming less so a symbol for freedom and equality, and more so of oppression and discrimination. In 2016, a public

demonstration was taken to recognise this social issue, when NFL player Colin Kaepernick began peaceful protests which involved taking a knee during the raising of the flag and national anthem, which went on to spread far beyond the NFL. In an interview he stated, "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour," and that he would continue to protest during the anthem until he feels like "[the United States flag] represents what it's supposed to represent." This is an excellent, high profile example of how coloured people in the US feel that their flag no longer represents their interests, nor does it support equality, rather it has become a symbol of alliance for nationalistic white Americans. The protest was an eye opener to not only Americans but the rest of the world, about how the Star Spangled Banner is outdated and represents a political system which protects those who are discriminative, and doesn't go far enough to protect injustice served to ethnic minorities. While people of colour made up about 30% of the US population in 2012, they accounted for 60% of all prison inmates, and the recent surge in the Black Lives Matter movement, as a result of the tragic murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, has hopefully accelerated the call for change to be made within the United States. To conclude the first half of this report, I believe that on the whole, the Star Spangled Banner is an incredibly compelling emblem for Americans, and does an outstanding job of not only representing the people within its borders, as proven by its extensive everyday use and popularity, but also presenting a strong, independent and historically patriotic nation. Although the extent of such an argument is of course slightly limited, I believe that change to the justice system and removal of racist and discriminative politicians will go further to support positive change for equality within the United States, than any edit to the flag ever could.

Over 8,000 miles from Washington DC, we reach the isolated Oceanic island of New Zealand, the country who's flag I'll be analysing next in this report. A topical flag in recent years, from 2015-16, New Zealanders voted on whether to replace their current flag, during a referendum



Current New Zealand flag

called for by Prime Minister, John Key. 56.61% of voters opted to keep the current flag over the new design, depicting a silver fern, in a very hotly contested debate which still raises valid argument about why it's time for the country to move on from their pre-colonial emblem. Problem number one with the current flag is the rather obvious Union Jack in the top left hand corner, and ever since New Zealand gained independence in 1947, for many citizens, this has been an unwelcomed reminder of the Colonial Era of the country's past. However, unlike many other Commonwealth nations such as South Africa and Canada, who have removed the Union Jack from their flag, Kiwis are still living under a flag which has its roots in a country on the other side of the world. Therefore, how can the flag ever truly represent the people of New Zealand when it draws anachronistic links to their colonial past, refusing to acknowledge the country as an independent, sovereign state? As a result of this legacy of British colonialism, the flags of three other independent nations feature the Union Jack, one of which, Australia, is extremely like that of New Zealand. This has led to the frequent confusion between the two flags, with John Key claiming he has been sat under the Australian flag at several international meetings, and while a nations flag is meant to be unique and representative to that population alone, how is this possible in the case of New Zealand when their flag is so similar to their Oceanic neighbours? One may even go as far to say that it portrays the island as one of the United Kingdom's eighteen other overseas territories, all of which include the Union Jack in the right hand corner, overlooking any sort



Proposed New Silver Fern Flag

of independence whatsoever. This lack of individual Kiwi identity and unwanted remainder of their colonial past are the main arguments to why I believe the flag is in need of a redesign. Moreover, criticism of the flag arises further when dealing with the representation of the native Maori people of the Island. The national flag exclusively acknowledges those of British descent, while ignoring not only the growingly diversity of the country in general, with White European majority decreasing from 92% to around 70% between 1961 and 2018, but also completely failing to represent the indigenous Maori population, which makes up 16.5% of the population. New Zealanders have heavily criticised the flag's ignorance towards the original settlers of the island is the 1300's, which as a result means the failure to recognise any pre-colonial history of the country.

Despite much protest and demand for a new flag within New Zealand, and after \$26 million spent on a two-year referendum, a 6.6% majority of voters opted to keep the flag, much to the embarrassment of John Key. Much of reasoning behind the outcome could be attributed towards the lacking imagination and creativity of the flags which were shortlisted, and most Indigenous input being whitewashed. However, strong arguments brought to the debate table influenced the decisions of over a million Kiwis, one of which being the extensive cost of changing a nation's flag outweighing any advantage; money which people felt could be spent elsewhere in the economy or over other socio-political issues. Others argued, more relevantly for this report, that the current flag already represents the people of New Zealand well enough, with professor Paul Moon claiming changing the flag would be 'amputating' any history of their nation, which has stood the test of time. Some claim that

the historical events for which the current flag has overseen, gives the emblem its value and worth, rather than the intrinsic meaning behind the flag design. You may even argue that the consensus in New Zealand before the referendum, was that the national flag was never considered an issue before the ballot slips were thrust in front of them. Controversy also arises when considering generations of young New Zealanders, drafted into the armed forces, who have served and died under either the Union Jack or the current flag. Removing the Union Jack and changing the flag would be hugely disrespectful towards the sacrifice of these men, and ignorantly erasing the memories of those who died for their country, and subsequently their flag, used in battle as early as the Gallipoli Campaign in 1915. In my opinion, the overarching arguments against change in New Zealand, is the premise that changing a flag as nation's identity changes, is inherently flawed, and instead a national flag matures over time. However, I believe it is essential for a population to feel encompassed and wholly represented by their flag, which in the case of New Zealand, requires a shift from their current pre-colonial emblem, to a symbol recognising their status as an independent sovereign nation.

In conclusion, both flags provide compelling arguments on both side of the debate spectrum, in relation to the extent by which they represent their populations. The Star Spangled Banner, perhaps the most widely used national flag in the world, holds immense inherent meaning and representation for the majority of Americas, due to its historical origins and usage, and the great extent to which it is present in everyday American life. Despite topical issues which have surrounded the flag, and it's links to Trump's Islamophobic campaign and racially motivated attacks which now get more essential media coverage, I believe that as the country becomes more politically and systematically inclusive, the flag will rediscover it's emotional value for all Americans, and therefore have the ability to

wholly represent the nation. On the other hand, the New Zealand flag is in desperate need of a change, and in my opinion, Kiwis missed out on a perfect opportunity to distance themselves from their colonial past, and therefore represent the independent people of their island. Strong arguments were made during the referendum, suggesting that past events in the country's history and the sacrifice soldiers made to the flag, provide the flag with emotional value; however I think that in order for the population to feel represented by the flag, a shift from its nation's past as an independent and weak territory must be taken, so that New Zealanders can feel the sort of emotional attachment to the flag that is felt by the majority of the Americans.

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