**Episode 9 – Your answer matters**

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Kerry: This year, Australia will hold a national referendum. This referendum will ask voters if the Constitution should be altered to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

With Australia’s last referendum being held over 20 years ago, many might not know why they’re held or how to vote.

Hi, I’m Kerry, and in this podcast, I’ll be joined by the team from the Australian Electoral Commission to unpack the process ahead of the referendum so that you can vote with confidence.

This is an unbiased and detailed look at why the referendum is important, how you can make your vote count, and why your answer matters.

 By now, we’ve looked at some historical referendum moments, covered the lead-up to a referendum and debunked some misconceptions. But now, you probably want to know what happens on voting day.

Meg and Alex are here again to talk us through the process. Welcome back team!

Meg: Hey there!

Alex: How’re we doing?

Kerry: So, let’s fast forward to voting day. I’m on my way to a polling place. What’s it going to look like?

Meg: So, it’ll look a lot like a federal election, if you’ve voted at a polling place at a federal election. We’re going to be hiring over eight thousand polling places and that includes schools, that includes churches, that includes community centres in your community. These are usually one day leases. So, we get eight thousand places for one day.

Kerry: So, voters can be pretty certain that no matter where they are, there’s going to be a polling place pretty close.

Alex: Not only can they be certain of that, they can find the nearest polling place by visiting aec.gov.au.

Kerry: Alright, so we’ve covered off the venues. So, let’s look at voters now. Who is eligible and where can people go if they’re not sure?

Alex: Sure, so, if you are over 18 and if you’re an Australian citizen, then you are eligible to vote in the referendum. And in fact, it’s not just an eligibility – it is a responsibility. So, you must enrol. We have compulsory enrolment and compulsory voting in Australia, and you can visit aec.gov.au to enrol, to check your enrolment or to update your details if you’ve recently moved house.

Kerry: What are the similarities and differences between referendum voting and election voting?

Meg: Going to a polling place will look similar to a federal election, but instead of getting two ballot papers – one green ballot paper for House of Reps and one white ballot paper for the Senate – you’ll get a very special referendum ballot paper, and its colour will be buff – which is a real colour.

Kerry: Gosh, buff! I’ve never heard of that colour in my entire life! So, what can people expect when they open the voting paper?

Alex: This is where it starts to look a bit different from your standard election. So, like Meg said, it’s going to be a buff ballot paper, it’s going to be about the same size as the House of Reps ballot paper – so, that sort of portrait view we might say, as opposed to landscape for the Senate – and it’s going to have some very different wording on it. So, up the top you are going to see the language of the proposed change to the Constitution, and that’s the language that would propose the Voice to Parliament. You can actually read that text in full on our website right now. So, you can familiarise yourself with it well before referendum day.

So, at a referendum there’s a single box and you’re asked whether you agree or disagree to this proposed change. Now, it’s really important that when you write that answer, that you write your response in full and in English. What that does, is that maximises the chance of your vote being counted as formal. If there’s anything less than a full word – ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ – then you run the risk of your ballot not being properly understood by the people who are counting it, and that runs the risk of your vote being informal. We don’t want to do that. We want as many people voting formally as possible. So, please just write your full answer – ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ or ‘No’ or ‘Yes’. Regardless of which way you’re going on the ballot paper, fold it over, pop in the box.

Kerry: OK, so, a really clear ‘Yes’ or a really clear ‘No’ in English.

Alex: Absolutely.

Kerry: So, what happens if English isn’t your first language? Can you vote in any language you like?

Meg: Well, our instructions are that you must vote in English. We’re very aware that there are a lot of Australians that come from culturally diverse backgrounds and because of this it’s so important for us to have resources in the polling place to assist voters. And that includes voting assistants who also have access to a number of resources in language that can help people to vote in English. We also have a number of resources on our website, but remember that, if you make a mistake when you’re voting, you can always get a new ballot paper.

Kerry: Whose job is it to check the ballot papers and decide if the vote should be counted?

Meg: So, the polling staff count the votes and there’s a lot of them on the day that will be responsible for allocating the votes into two piles – ‘Yes’ piles and ‘No’ piles – and this will be done in front of scrutineers. Scrutineers are people appointed by parties to watch the counting, watch the vote. They’re not allowed to touch the ballot papers, but they just watch, and they can also challenge different ballot papers. So, if a polling staff makes a call they say, oh this looks like a ‘Yes’, and the scrutineer thinks that it looks like a ‘No’, they can challenge it.

Alex: I should add as well, those poll workers and scrutineers as well are the absolute superheroes of democracy. So, when the polling place closes at six o’clock – you might be forgiven for thinking that – that’s it, everyone knocks off for the day and you’re done. If you’re a polling worker, that actually is the start of the second half of your job. And that is the count that happens on the night. So, at the AEC we actually tend to count every vote that we have in our possession on the night. That’s going to be millions and millions of votes that we’re counting that night, and all of that data will be flowing into our tally room and of course flowing onto computer screens, and television coverage all over the country. It’s a really, really complicated logistical process and like Meg says, it’s overseen by scrutineers at every step.

Those people are giving up their time and really contributing to Australian democracy, it is such an important thing that these people are doing, and we would be nowhere without then. Say thank you to a poll worker when you see them on the day.

Kerry: Say thank you to a poll worker and give them a democracy sausage while you’re there.

Alex: Definitely!

Kerry: So, I actually think I’m going to be potentially be away on a voting day, I’m going overseas. So, what happens if I’m not in Australia on the day to vote in person?

Meg: Well, if you’re overseas, there are some options for you, like attending an embassy overseas, but the most common options that we offer if you’re not overseas, but you can’t get there on the day, is early voting. So that’s pre poll voting that opens two weeks before polling day and postal voting. There’re also options for people if you live remotely or if you’re in residential care, but I urge you to check the website and get our most recent advice.

Alex: Regardless of what your circumstances are, if you’re jet-setting around the world, if you’re in residential care, even if you’re not going to be home for a couple of weeks – maybe if you’re a FIFO worker is a great example, we’ve got a lot of people in WA who are in that boat. The most important thing is to plan your vote. So, think about what your circumstances are. We’re going to know for about 33 days in advance what the actual day of the referendum will be. So, think ahead. Think about what you might be doing on that day, and if you don’t think you’re going to be in a position to go in and vote on the day, that’s a bit of a signal that you might want to think about a pre-poll vote, applying for a postal vote….

And of course, if you are overseas as well, you can actually fill out an overseas notification form on our website as well. It’s quite easy to find and that will just let us know to not to send you a non-voter certificate, because you’re out of the country.

Kerry: So, on that topic of planning ahead, it is easy to think that everyone lives near a polling place or that they can read the voting instructions. But what do you do for people with issues around accessibility or, like I’ve mentioned, maybe not even being near a polling place?

Meg: We do a lot of work on accessibility because it’s so crucial that every single person and every single voter can participate in the electoral process. One thing that we make sure is that every single polling place has an accessibility rating. So, people who have issues with accessing polling places, there’s a rating on there and then inside a polling place we have staff who have resources and can help you fill out your vote. And even help you cast your vote in the car if you can’t make in the polling place.

Alex: Now, if you’re blind or you have low vision, the option for you is telephone voting as well. That’s something that we’ve been offering for a few years now. And that’s a service where you actually call up the AEC. First, you speak to one operator, who identifies you on the phone. Then you actually get a code to call a second operator. The reason you do that is actually so the second operator doesn’t know who you are. So, you still have your secret ballot, even if you’re voting by phone. And that second operator talks you through what’s on the ballot paper, asks for your vote – that’ll be your ‘Yes’ or your ‘No’ vote, and then lodges it on your behalf.

Meg: And actually, there’s also another operator who listens and checks the vote-taker has correctly recorded the vote – kind of like phone scrutineers.

Alex: It’s a way for people who might not be able to read a ballot paper to still cast a vote in a anonymous and safe way.

Kerry: It must be pretty hard to run a vote across the entire country. So again, back on our topic of planning, what kind of planning does that even take?

Alex: Years of it.

Kerry: A lot!

Alex: So, we like to say that a general election tends to take about four years of planning that we cram into three. This referendum will take about four years of planning, and we’ve crammed into about 18 months. So, it’s a huge logistical exercise. It’s actually the largest peacetime logistical exercise that Australia undertakes. And we like to think that every election and referendum resets that record. It’s like breaking your own world record. But every event we have more voters, more polling places, and more people watching the result, honestly. So, it’s a very, very big operation and we’re not just thinking about Australians in capital cities. We’re thinking about people everywhere. People in remote communities, people who’re even out on Christmas Island, the Cocos Keeling Islands…everyone’s a voter. If you are entitled to vote, we have an obligation to get a ballot paper to you and make sure that you can participate in this referendum.

Kerry: Yeah, wow. So, there’s obviously a lot of people involved but it all sounds very exciting. So, what if I myself am keen to work at the referendum?

Meg: Absolutely, you should come join us! The AEC is recruiting up until polling day and we need over one hundred thousand staff. So, it’s a really cool opportunity to be a part of a historical event and if you’re interested, you can learn more on our website.

Kerry: And now, for the most important question of the day…will there be democracy sausages?

Alex: Just like at a federal election, there will be democracy sausages. And of course, that money goes not to the AEC, but it’s actually run by charities, those sausage sizzles. They tend to go to groups like your local parents and friends’ group for your school, local sports associations, things like that - it’s a really, really good cause. Of course, have a sausage, a cupcake, if there’s a cake stall and lucky you if you find one, and have a democracy coffee if you find a barista.

Kerry: Democracy coffee, say less! Thank you so much Alex.

Alex: You’re welcome.

Kerry: On the next episode…

Alex: If a contest is particularly tight, and of course we’ve got a count that we’re doing for each of the six states as well as the national count – so, if there’s a really close result in any of those, it might be a while before we arrive at a formal result, which is – the AEC is in a position to declare a result once it’s mathematically impossible for any other result to happen.

Kerry: The votes are in; the booths are closed. But what happens next after voting day? That’s next time, on Your Answer Matters.

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