**Episode 2 – The history of referendums**

A LISTNR Production

Sponsored by the Australian Electoral Commission

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.

Last episode, we looked at why referendums happen in the first place. And today I’m back with Meg and Alex to look at the history of referendums in Australia…and you might even learn some pub trivia answers for the next time referendum is the topic (because I’m sure that happens all the time!).

Hi Meg, hi Alex – thanks for joining me today.

Meg: Hi Kerry!

Alex: Hey Kerry, it’s so good to be back.

Kerry: So, let’s jump right in. How many referendums have been held in Australia?

Alex: Australia’s had 44 referendums in our history and that means that this year is number 45.

Kerry: That’s actually a pretty surprising number to me, I didn’t realise that we’d actually had that many. How common are they? Do they happen frequently?

Meg: Look, that’s a big number but they’re relatively uncommon. In fact, we haven’t had one for 24 years. So, if you’re younger, or if you’re below the age of 42, you probably haven’t voted in a referendum.

Kerry: When was the last referendum?

Alex: So, the last one actually happened in 1999, and there were two questions. So, the first was about becoming a republic, and the second was about adding a preamble to the Constitution.

Kerry: OK, wow, we have had quite a few referendums…what kind of topics have they covered?

Meg: Well, they’ve covered a range of issues. Anything that’s included in the Constitution so that can be – the timing of elections, financial agreements between the states and federal government, and even when judges can retire.

Kerry: And can referendums be held together with an election?

Alex: They absolutely can. So, we’ve had eight referendums in Australia’s history that have happened the same time as a federal election, but it’s not something that’s happened recently. So, the last election that happened at the same time as a referendum was the 1988 election…been a few years since then…and every referendum and, for that matter, every election that’s happened since has been separate. Ultimately, it is up to the government to pick the timing of both referendums and elections.

Kerry: That’s an interesting stat – another one for pub trivia I think. Can you stack referendums up and ask multiple questions at the same time?

Meg: You absolutely can. So, in 1999, the public was asked two questions. Before that, in 1988, we had a referendum that asked four questions.

Alex: If we’re looking at the stats – if I’m putting on my sportscaster/statistician hat – we’ve had 44 referendum questions since 1901, but only 19 referendum voting days. So, that’s an average of 2.3 questions per voting day.

Kerry: I love that math. Is Australia the only country that does referendums?

Alex: Definitely not the only country that does referendums. In fact, looking back through the constitutional conventions of the 1890s – as I know you love doing, Kerry! – we actually borrowed the term from Switzerland, I believe, who had the term. It’s originally an ancient Latin term that was, sort of, picked up and adjusted and adopted into English. But there are a number of different countries that hold referendums. Typically, those countries don’t just do it for Constitutional change like Australia does. So, the ones that I’ve had a look at are the UK, Canada, and New Zealand. In New Zealand and the UK, you can just have a referendum on any particular topic. In Canada, which is of course Meg’s home country, they have held plebiscites in the past, but they called them referendums. And there was a fascinating one I read about in 1898 where they had a national plebiscite on whether they should do prohibition of alcohol. Now, every province in Canada voted to do it – except for Quebec, and they voted ‘No’ extremely hard, by something like 80 per cent. So, a very very firm rebuke there from the Quebecois.

Kerry: I’ve collected quite a bit of pub trivia knowledge through our chats just now, so thank you for that. What is the weirdest pub trivia fact you know about referendums?

Alex: Look, I don’t know if you’ve been to an AEC trivia night or not Kerry, but our trivia is always about election history, and I’ve got a nice election slash referendum fact. So, back in 1906 Australia held its first ever referendum, and the topic of that one was whether the Constitution should be changed to allow House and Senate elections to happen at the same time. So, the way the Constitution was originally drafted, you had to hold them separately. The referendum changed things to allow them to be held at the same time. Now, if you’ve voted at any Australian election in the last, I want to say, two decades at least, you’ll have voted for the House and the Senate at the same time. That’s just the way we do things now, it’s considered normal. It would be considered unusual for a split election to be held. And the reason elections are held in the sort of, way we now perceive to be normal, is because in 1906 we held a referendum, changed the Constitution, and established the way that elections could be run going forward.

Kerry: That’s a great piece of pub trivia. Thanks for that.

Alex: You’re very welcome.

Kerry: On the next episode of Your Answer Matters…

Meg: We’re Australia’s independent election experts. We promote enrolment, we do public education activities, and when there’s not an event running, we redraw the boundary lines for electorates to make sure everything’s fair and balanced.

Kerry: …we’ll learn a little bit more about the AEC. Join us then as we get you vote ready for the 2023 referendum.

LISTNR