ALL of the candidates in California's recall election seem to be discussing the delicate semantics of "special interests."

Arnold Schwarzenegger began his campaign to lead California by pledging to become "the people's governor," vowing that he would accept no money from the "special interests who have a stranglehold on Sacramento." When it turned out that he had accepted contributions from developers and other wealthy individuals, he explained that those weren't special interests but merely "powerful interests who control things."

What he had meant, he said, was that he would refuse contributions only from public employee unions or other groups he might have to negotiate with as governor. He apologized for the confusion by saying, "I was not articulate enough to explain that."

In fairness to Mr. Schwarzenegger, "special interest" is a phrase that everyone uses selectively. He is guilty merely of having acknowledged explicitly what everyone else prudently leaves unsaid.

But the words that everyone takes for granted are usually the ones that work the most mischief in political life. The British politician Aneurin Bevan once said that the student of politics "must always be on his guard against the old words, for the words persist when the reality behind them has changed."

As it happens, Mr. Schwarzenegger's campaign language, like the recall itself, is a legacy of the Progressive era. The California recall process was adopted in 1911 under Gov. Hiram Johnson, the Progressive who had been elected on a pledge much like Mr. Schwarzenegger's, to "return the government of California to the people." But in Johnson's case the "stranglehold" was exercised not by the public employee unions but by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Like many Progressives, Johnson put his faith in electoral reforms like the recall and the referendum, which "place in the hands of the people the means by which they may protect themselves."

The Progressives batted on that opposition between "the people" and "the interests," as they referred to the trusts, corporations and financial combines. By 1922, Walter Lippmann noted, the language of that struggle had become a cliche.

"The question of a proper fare on a municipal subway is symbolized as an issue between the People and the Interests . . . so that finally in the heat of a campaign, an 8-cent fare becomes un-
American," he said. "The Revolutionary fathers died to prevent it. Lincoln suffered that it might not come to pass. . . ."

Even so, the notion of "interest" was central to the age's thinking about democracy. The word crops up over and over again in the writings of Henry Adams, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Herbert Croly, Lippmann and John Dewey. It oscillated among its personal, economic and political meanings, as writers struggled to define the paramount political virtue of disinterestedness.

Much of the Progressives' language survived the era, along with their reforms, but both were altered and denatured. By the time Robert LaFollette ran for president on the Progressive ticket in 1924, it was clear that "the interests" had adapted to the political and administrative reforms of the era, a fact that could be seen in the appearance of the expression "politics as usual." Money still talked, even if it had to speak in a different tone of voice.

LaFollette was probably the last major politician to rail against the trusts and corporations with the bald phrase "the interests." By the New Deal, it had been replaced by "special interests," and later by "special interest groups."

In those phrases, though, the meaning of "interest" was no longer restricted to economically powerful groups like corporations and, later, labor unions. By 1948, a letter writer to The New York Times could describe opera fans as a special interest group that shouldn't be subsidized by public funds. And in modern usage a special interest can be just about any group that favors a particular law or policy, though always with the implication that its demands are at odds with the interests of "the people."

The Weekly Standard inveighs against "special interest legislation" like the California law that gives workplace protection for cross-dressing employees. An Environmental Protection Agency administrator talks about the special interests that tried unsuccessfully to get greenhouse-gas emissions classified as pollutants. A sample grant application from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety gives "anti-tobacco" as an example of a special interest group. And Hootie Johnson, the chairman of the Augusta National Golf Club, insists that the club will not "capitulate to special interest groups" by agreeing to admit women.

The modern usage obscures the difference between having an interest and being one. We may talk about banking interests or labor interests, but "the women's interest" and "the cross-dressing interest" don't come easily to the tongue.

"Special interest" blurs the distinction between the economic and political senses of "interest" that the Progressives struggled to reconcile. Now everyone is "interested," in the old sense of the word -- the environmentalists as much as the carmakers, the American Cancer Society as much as the tobacco companies.

The passing of the old sense of interest took disinterestedness over the side along with it. Usage critics exaggerate when they lament the disappearance of the sense of disinterested that means, roughly, "impartial." That meaning still accounts for a majority of its uses in the press.
But disinterested isn't a word that comes up much when we try to define political virtue. There's no place to stand that's free from what William Dean Howells called "the sordid competition of interests," now that interest itself has been given so broad a charter.

Yet there's one feature of the Progressives' notion of interest that has survived. We still think of special interests as groups that have obtained a back-door influence on law or policy, whether it's purchased by campaign contributions or bartered for political support. Whether the word is applied to women's groups or tobacco companies, the implication is that they wouldn't be able to put their views across in a direct popular appeal.

What's curious is how many interested parties that definition exempts: corporations that take out advertisements or create foundations to promote their political opinions, people who buy newspapers or television networks to disseminate their views, millionaires who use their own money to finance their political ambitions or a recall election. Those aren't special interests, but merely "powerful interests who control things," as Mr. Schwarzenegger put it. Hiram Johnson would have found nothing to fault in that language, either.

[Illustration]
Drawing (Drawing by MK Mabry)