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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Anti-Gay, Anti-Family

By DAN SAVAGE

COUNTLESS Americans, gay and otherwise, are still mourning — and social conservatives are still celebrating — the approval last Tuesday of anti-gay-marriage amendments in Florida, Arizona and, most heartbreaking, California, where Proposition 8 stripped same-sex couples of their right to wed. Eighteen thousand same-sex couples were legally married in California this past summer and fall; their marriages are now in limbo.

But while Californians march and gay activists contemplate a national boycott of Utah — the Mormon Church largely bankrolled Proposition 8 — an even more ominous new law in Arkansas has drawn little notice.

That state's Proposed Initiative Act No. 1, approved by nearly 57 percent of voters last week, bans people who are "cohabitating outside a valid marriage" from serving as foster parents or adopting children. While the measure bans both gay and straight members of cohabitating couples as foster or adoptive parents, the Arkansas Family Council wrote it expressly to thwart "the gay agenda." Right now, there are 3,700 other children across Arkansas in state custody; 1,000 of them are available for adoption. The overwhelming majority of these children have been abused, neglected or abandoned by their heterosexual parents.

Even before the law passed, the state estimated that it had only about a quarter of the foster parents it needed. Beginning on Jan. 1, a grandmother in Arkansas cohabitating with her opposite-sex partner because marrying might reduce their pension benefits is barred from taking in her own grandchild; a gay man living with his male partner cannot adopt his deceased sister's children.

Social conservatives are threatening to roll out Arkansas-style adoption bans in other states. And the timing couldn't be worse: in tough economic times, the numbers of abused and neglected children in need of foster care rises. But good times or bad, no movement that would turn away qualified parents and condemn children to a broken foster care system should be considered "pro-family."

Most ominous, once "pro-family" groups start arguing that gay couples are unfit to raise children we might adopt, how long before they argue that we're unfit to raise those we've already adopted? If lesbian couples are unfit to care for foster children, are they fit to care for their own biological children?

The loss in California last week was heartbreaking. But what may be coming next is terrifying.

Dan Savage is the editorial director of The Stranger, a Seattle newsweekly, and the author of "The Commitment: Love, Sex, Marriage and My Family."