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Title: The New Atheism and Democracy

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9/1/2007--Can people think and talk about our collective lives in meaningful ways? Increasingly, some thinkers on the left question that premise—the possibility of meaningful political discourse. There are a number of political writers, most recently Drew Westen in *The Political Brain*, who argue that rational political discourse is a cover for various psychological needs. In Westen's book this psychological need is for emotions that make us feel good. John Judis expanded this theme in *The New Republic* in August 2007, arguing that politics is a subconscious struggle against the fear of death. What is the message of these writers? Partly, it is an excuse for past Democratic Party losses. The Party, it is said, is too intellectual, too rational. The Republicans are better at the needed psychological manipulation. This idea is also present in political work, like that of Jeffrey Feldman in *Framing the Debate*, that suggests that framing an issue is the key to winning elections. There is a sense in which all of our efforts in life are an attempt to come to terms with death. The point of this recent psychological work, however, is not to help us understand who we are, where we are going and what it all means. The point is to view politics as psychological manipulation. These thinkers conclude that voters don't actually know what they are voting about. I assume something very different. I assume that political discourse is meaningful on its own terms. When I say politics is rational, I don't mean that it is mere instrumentalism. Nor do I mean that it is mere self-interest. I mean that the voters do know in a general way what they are doing. If their emotions are engaged, it is only because that is how we live. If the fear of death is in play, that is only because we know we are mortal. Of course there is such a thing as persuasive discourse. And politicians, like trial lawyers, should put their arguments in the most persuasive package they can. But we assume that in court trial tactics only go so far. We assume that at some point, the facts decide the matter. That is true in politics too. The Democratic Party lost its majority status after 1968. There were many reasons for this. People certainly will disagree about what happened and why. But there were reasons for this political change. It was not all image. Like trials, politics is ultimately about something real in the world. Good presentation only gets you so far. The new political irrationalism that says politics is unthinking psychology and rhetoric is another form of atheism. It is another way of saying that we live in a world of chaos and meaninglessness. Hallowed Secularism stands on this key point with Our Religions in denying that that is so.