

JANUARY 27, 2011, 11:18 AM ET

Obama's Energy Shift: It's Not About Climate

President **Barack Obama's** calls this week for more spending on research for clean energy have omitted a certain, politically charged seven-letter word: Climate.

In his remarks at a solar energy technology plant in Wisconsin Wednesday, and in Tuesday's State of the Union address, Mr. Obama called for federal funding to develop more cost competitive, low-emissions energy technology – without using the word “climate” or the phrase “climate change” once. (In Manitowoc, Wis., he did suggest creating jobs through low-emissions energy technology could make “the planet safer.” But he never said the word “climate.”)

Mr. Obama has long been a strong advocate of technology to cut the use of coal and oil, and that hasn't changed. His administration is still trying to curb carbon dioxide emissions from burning coal and oil through clean-air regulations.

But his rhetoric has shifted since the failure of a proposed cap and trade bill, which he backed. That proposal would have sought to increase the price of burning fossil fuels, in part to narrow their cost edge over solar, wind, nuclear and other lower-carbon energy sources. It reflected the views of established environmental groups that supported Mr. Obama in 2008.

The new, 2011 Obama energy rhetoric appears to embrace the idea that the politically palatable way to cut greenhouse gas emissions is to make low-carbon energy cheaper, instead of using taxes or government-imposed limits to make coal and oil more expensive. That approach has been promoted by Danish economist [Bjorn Lomborg](#) and like-minded thinkers in the U.S. such as **Michael Shellenberger** and **Ted Nordhaus** of the [Breakthrough Institute](#).

Mr. Lomborg, in an email, says Mr. Obama's comments about R&D “was certainly encouraging,” adding the speech “speaks volumes that discussion is no longer about carbon cuts or even framed as being about global warming; it's about solving the massive energy research challenge in front of us. That's very promising.”

However, Mr. Lomborg said Mr. Obama's goal for putting 1 million electric vehicles on the road in four years, or pushing to have 80% of U.S. electricity come from “clean energy” by 2035, “sounds impossible unless you spend most of the money subsidizing existing, inefficient green technologies.”

Messrs. Shellenberger and Nordhaus, in a statement, praised Mr. Obama for supporting energy innovation “ for economic competitiveness rather than climate reasons.”



President Barack Obama tours Orion Energy Systems, a company that makes high-efficiency lighting and renewable solar technology for businesses, in Manitowoc, Wis., Wednesday. He is joined by Orion founder and CEO Neal Verfueth. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)