The Bundys and their sympathizers subscribe to a long-disproven idea that the federal government lacks constitutional authority to own and manage federal public lands. In a radio interview, Cliven Bundy was quoted as saying, “I don’t recognize the United States government as even existing.” He’s even challenged federal authority to own and administer public land in federal court — and lost badly. In the view of Bundy and others in the public-land seizure movement, if the federal government were removed as an obstacle, they would be free to wrest control over, and wring profit out of, these lands.

This disdain of the U.S. government and desire to put the state in charge of public lands is echoed by a number of elected officials in Congress who are also advancing anti-public lands bills. Spurred by donations from the Koch brothers and other industry interests, these legislators want to limit or eliminate federal authority over public lands to facilitate their industrialization and privatization.

In Congress, bills that seek to give ownership of, or authority over, public lands to state and private interests have become a fixture. More than 130 such bills have been introduced in the past three Congresses thanks to oil-and-gas-funded legislators like Rob Bishop (R-Utah), Mark Amodei (R-Nev.) and Raul Labrador (R-Idaho). In the Senate Mike Lee (R-Utah), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), Dean Heller (R-Nev.) and others have carried the anti-public-lands torch. These officials have introduced legislation such as Senate Amendment 838, which very narrowly passed and put the Senate on record as encouraging the disposal of most federal land; S. 635, a companion bill to H.R. 435; and S. 1524, which would have allowed western states to take 5 percent of the federal mineral, oil and gas land within their borders.

These land-seizure bills include would force the secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to sell public lands to the states, or would allow states and oil and gas companies to call the shots on public lands while leaving American taxpayers to foot the bill. Others would open millions of acres of national forests to increased logging.

At the state level, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative think tank funded by the likes of Exxon Mobil, drafts and promotes model legislation to eliminate or severely limit the federal authority and environmental safeguards. The American Lands Council, which is closely connected to ALEC, lobbies, sometimes with taxpayer money, for these bills at the state and local levels. Through these tactics, in places like Arizona, Wyoming, Nevada, Arizona and Utah, Big Oil’s money has bought bills that call for the study or demand the outright takeover of America’s public lands by the states.

But these attempts to foment a groundswell movement have been failing. In 2016, outside of Utah, 15 of 16 public-land seizure bills introduced at the state level failed. Massive shows of opposition against public land give away have taken place in Wyoming, Montana, New Mexico and elsewhere. 2017 Poll results released show many more respondents oppose rather than support state takeover of federal public lands. Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) recently withdrew his bill to sell certain public lands after massive public outrage.

The ideology of the Bundys and industry-supported legislators that favor private interests over public lands is one that is deeply unpopular with most Americans. Overwhelmingly, citizens of the United States highly value the lands that we all own and want to keep our public lands in public hands.