

The Perfect Bill That Protects No Dog

Why the movement to ban aversive training tools keeps defeating itself, and what history demands we do instead.

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The Civil War Inside the Movement

Every movement that has ever tried to write compassion into law has fought the same civil war. Not the war against its opponents. The war against itself.

The movement to ban shock collars, prong collars, and choke collars is fighting that war right now, and almost no one outside of it can see the battle. Here is the shape of it. Legislation to prohibit these tools keeps being drafted, and legislation keeps dying. Look closely at the laws that actually passed, and a pattern emerges. Many contain exemptions, derogations, or phased commencement: for police and military dogs, for other working dogs, or through transition periods measured in years. Where bans passed outright the industry still fought: the Welsh ban of 2010 survived a High Court challenge brought by the collar manufacturers themselves.¹ And a broad belt of Europe, from Germany and Austria to Switzerland and the Nordic countries, already prohibits these tools under its animal welfare laws, a record confirmed on the legislative tracking page of the industry's own professional association.² In the United States, no comprehensive state prohibition has passed at all, and the bills advancing furthest are precisely the ones built around limits and carve-outs. New York's trainer licensure bill, by its own official text, applies only to individuals training non-service and non-police dogs, a design New York legislators have carried through a decade of predecessor bills.³ The Massachusetts bills exclude electric, prong, and choke collars from mandated behavior modification plans rather than banning the tools everywhere at once, a design confirmed by the same industry association in the course of opposing it.² And yet a vocal faction within the force-free movement now insists that any bill containing an exemption must not merely be declined support. It must be actively opposed. Fought. Killed.

I understand the instinct. It comes from a good place. If a shock collar is a welfare violation on a Labrador in a suburban backyard, it is a welfare violation on a Malinois in a police kennel. The dog's nervous system does not check the handler's badge. The peer-reviewed evidence on the welfare costs of these tools and the efficacy of reward-based training does not contain an asterisk for working dogs.⁴ On the ethics, the absolutists are simply correct, and I will not pretend otherwise.

But ethics and strategy are not the same discipline, and confusing them has a body count. In this case the body count is measured in dogs: every pet dog who will wear a shock collar next year, and the year after, and the year after that, in jurisdictions where a bill protecting them was achievable and was killed by its own side in the name of purity.

The Fight We Are Actually Losing

Let us be honest about the battlefield in 2026. The aversive tool industry and the trainers who depend on it are organized, funded, and represented by professional associations that show up at every hearing. The force-free side is newer to legislative combat, thinner on money, and now, incredibly, divided against itself over whether a bill that protects the overwhelming majority of dogs is worth passing.

And it is the overwhelming majority. The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates the pet dog population of the United States at 89.7 million as of 2024.⁵ The United States military reports roughly 1,600 military working dogs in service across all branches.⁶ Add every police K-9 in the country, counted as generously as you like, and working military and law enforcement dogs still amount to a small fraction of one percent of American dogs. A ban with a military and law enforcement exemption is not a half measure. It is a measure that reaches more than 99 out of every 100 dogs. The all-or-nothing position asks us to leave 100 out of 100 dogs unprotected, indefinitely, as the price of a symbolic stand on behalf of fewer than one in a hundred.

That is not moral seriousness. That is moral mathematics done badly.

What the Map Already Proves

We do not need to speculate about whether the incremental path works, because on this exact issue, on these exact tools, it is working in front of us, in the primary legal record of Europe. Four entries settle this debate.

The Netherlands. The Dutch pinch collar ban took effect in July 2018.⁷ The national prohibition on shock equipment entered into force on January 1, 2022, and the decree contains an express exception for the tasks of the police, the military police, and the armed forces, including training conducted by those government organizations themselves.⁸ During the legislative fight, opponents pushed to widen the exception to hunters and private police-dog trainers, and a parliamentary majority voted those motions

down, keeping the exception narrow: government personnel only, in exceptional cases, and only after non-aversive methods have failed.⁸ The government scheduled a formal evaluation of the exception for the first half of 2026, with an eye toward ending it, and the Dutch police and armed forces stopped acquiring dogs trained with shock equipment.⁹ Read that carefully, because it is the entire architecture this article argues for, already enacted and already working: a ban that protects every pet dog in the country now, a narrow working-dog exception instead of a dead bill, a scheduled review with an expiration horizon, and the exempted agencies phasing the tools out on their own.

Belgium, in two acts. Wallonia's prohibition on electric, choke, and prong collars took effect on April 1, 2023, with derogations allowing electric collars for the utility dogs of Civil Security, the federal and local police, Defense, and Customs, subject to dedicated training, and, since April 1, 2024, subject to a requirement that this use be notified to and justified before the Walloon animal welfare administration.¹⁰ That is precisely the exemption now being denounced as a betrayal, wrapped inside exactly the reporting requirement this article proposes, inside a comprehensive regional ban that is protecting dogs today. Belgium's animal protection organizations criticized the derogation and proposed that it be time-limited, with an end date around 2030, even as the Walloon animal protection federation called the text positive for animal welfare. They did not threaten to kill the ban. They banked it and kept pushing.¹⁰ Flanders took the other road. The Flemish Parliament approved its prohibition on remote-controlled and bark-activated shock collars in March 2022, in force January 1, 2027, covering use and sale, with no exception for the army, the police, or behavior therapists.¹¹ And how did a no-exception ban get through? Time. By the minister's own announcement, the transition period to 2027 exists so that institutions such as the army and the police can move to animal-friendly alternatives.¹¹ The two Belgian regions, side by side, are the whole argument in miniature. One region compromised through exemptions and is protecting dogs now. The other compromised through time and will protect all dogs in 2027. Nobody got a perfect bill. Both got a ban.

Spain. The national animal welfare law of 2023 prohibits electric, impulse, punishment, and choke collars.¹² The law's scope excludes working categories, among them police dogs, rescue dogs, herding dogs, and hunting dogs, and the hunting-dog exclusion stands among the law's most criticized features in the animal protection community.¹² Purists could have burned the bill down over it. It passed, and companion dogs across Spain gained national protection from these tools. France, meanwhile, is drafting the same clause in real time: when the National Assembly took up a national bill to ban the sale of electric, choke, and prong collars, the reporting committee adopted an amendment exempting the dog-handling services and units of the armed forces before the bill moved forward.¹³

And then there is the cautionary mirror image. Wales banned electronic collars outright in 2010, and that ban has held for sixteen years.¹ England announced its own ban in 2018 to enormous public support.¹⁴ The Animal Welfare (Electronic Collars) (England) Regulations 2023 were laid before Parliament and approved by the House of Lords in June 2023, with a commencement date of February 1, 2024. That date came and went. The House of Commons was never given time to approve the instrument, and as of this writing the ban has still not come into force, with the British Veterinary Association and a coalition of

the country's leading welfare organizations publicly pleading with the Government to finish the job.¹⁵ Eight years after the announcement, every pet dog in England remains legally shockable. Dogs do not benefit from announcements. They benefit from enacted law.

The Movements That Won Did Not Win All at Once

If the pattern inside our own issue is not persuasive enough, zoom out. Search the history of social and welfare legislation for a single example of an entrenched practice, defended by organized economic interests, that was abolished in one clean, exemption-free sweep that held. You will be searching for a long time. Now look at what you find instead.

Abolition itself, the moral North Star of every reform movement since, was incremental. Britain banned the slave trade in 1807 and did not abolish slavery in its colonies until 1833, and even that act included a phased transition.¹⁶ In the United States, the movement split famously between immediatists, who denounced every compromise as complicity, and political abolitionists, who fought for whatever ground could actually be taken, culminating in the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 only after a series of partial measures.¹⁷ The immediatists supplied the moral clarity, and history should honor them for it. But it was the incrementalists who passed the laws that held. Where the immediatist decree did pass, it did not last.

The International Whaling Commission adopted its moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, in force from 1986, with an exemption for aboriginal subsistence whaling.¹⁸ Purists objected that whales do not care who is holding the harpoon. They were right about the whales and wrong about the strategy, because the moratorium passed, commercial whaling collapsed to a small fraction of its former scale, and the moratorium remains in place more than four decades later. The exemption did not discredit the moratorium. The moratorium reshaped the moral landscape of an entire industry.

The European Union did not ban animal testing for cosmetics in one stroke. The testing ban on finished products took effect in September 2004, the testing ban on ingredients in March 2009, and the full marketing ban in March 2013.¹⁹ The EU's prohibition on barren battery cages for laying hens was enacted in 1999 with a phase-in period of more than a decade, taking full effect in 2012.²⁰ Florida voters ended commercial greyhound racing in November 2018 with 69 percent of the vote, and the amendment gave the industry until December 31, 2020 to wind down.²¹ The United Kingdom's Animal Welfare Act 2006 banned cosmetic tail docking of dogs, and it passed with an exemption for certified working dogs.²² That last example should sting a little, because it is a dog welfare law, it contains exactly the kind of working-dog exemption now being denounced as surrender, and it has protected puppies from cosmetic docking for nearly two decades.

Exemptions, phase-ins, sunset periods, transition windows. This is not the vocabulary of sellouts. It is the vocabulary of every welfare victory on the books.

The Movements That Demanded Everything

The all-or-nothing approach has a track record too, and it deserves a hard look.

Revolutionary France passed the immediatist bill. The National Convention abolished slavery by immediate decree in 1794, with no transition, no exemptions, and no compensation. Napoleon restored slavery in 1802, and French abolition had to be won all over again, arriving for good only in 1848.¹⁶

American temperance advocates spent decades winning incremental victories through local option laws, town by town, county by county. Then the movement reached for the total, national, exemption-free solution: constitutional Prohibition. It got everything it asked for in 1920. Within fourteen years the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by the Twenty-First, the cause was discredited for generations, and the practice it targeted came roaring back with organized crime attached.²³ Bhutan enacted one of the most sweeping tobacco sales prohibitions in the world beginning in 2004, codified in its Tobacco Control Act of 2010, and repealed the sales ban in 2021 after years of black market growth and smuggling that the prohibition itself had fueled.²⁴ Maximalism did not merely fail in these cases. It handed the opposition its best talking points for the next fifty years.

So here is the question the absolutists in our movement have never answered: name the precedent. Name one entrenched, economically defended practice that was eliminated durably, in a single sweep, with no exemptions and no phase-in, over organized opposition. The historical record of incrementalism is long and full of victories. The historical record of legislative maximalism is Prohibition.

The Exemption That Is Not Even a Concession

There is one more fact that changes this debate entirely in the United States, and it is remarkable how rarely it gets said out loud.

State legislatures generally cannot regulate the United States military. Under the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution and the long-settled doctrine of intergovernmental immunity, state law does not bind federal instrumentalities in the performance of federal functions, and that includes the training and deployment of federal military working dogs.²⁵ A state bill with no military exemption is not a stronger bill. It is a bill making a promise it is constitutionally incapable of keeping, while carrying all the political weight of appearing to handcuff soldiers and police. Legislators read that language, see a political fight with law enforcement lobbies attached to a promise about federal dogs that cannot survive court review, and quietly let the bill die.

In other words, the exemption being treated as a moral surrender is, in large part, a plain statement of jurisdiction. Demanding its removal does not protect a single military dog. It only guarantees that the pet dogs a state actually can protect remain unprotected. Opposing a bill on those grounds is not holding the line. It is mistaking the label on the map for the territory.

The Purists' Best Argument Deserves a Real Answer

I want to be fair, because the strongest version of the absolutist argument is not stupid, and pretending it is would be its own kind of dishonesty. The argument goes like this: an exemption writes into law the premise that shocking a dog is sometimes acceptable. It legitimizes the tool. It creates a permanent asterisk that the industry will exploit forever.

That risk is real, and the answer to it is not to kill the bill. The answer is to write the bill correctly. Exemptions can be built as scheduled second fights rather than permanent surrenders. Attach a sunset clause requiring the exemption to be reauthorized rather than assumed. Mandate a review after a fixed period, with published data on how often the exempted tools are actually used and to what effect. Require exempted agencies to report and justify. None of this is theoretical, because every piece of it is already enacted somewhere in Europe. The Netherlands wrote a narrow government exception and put its formal review on the calendar for 2026.⁹ Wallonia wrote police and military derogations and then required the exempted services to notify and justify their use to the animal welfare administration.¹⁰ Flanders exempted no one, army and police included, and secured passage with a multi-year transition built for exactly those institutions.¹¹ A carve-out with a review date, a reporting duty, and an expiration horizon is not a constitutional right to shock a working dog forever. It is chapter one of a book whose later chapters are already being written.

A movement mature enough to legislate is mature enough to legislate in phases. Protect more than 99 percent of dogs now. Put the remaining fight on the calendar, in writing, with a date. That is not abandoning military and police dogs. That is the only strategy that has ever actually reached them.

Whose Side Does Perfection Serve?

Step back and ask the coldest question in politics: who benefits?

The companies that sell shock collars do not need to defeat a united force-free movement, and they know it. They need only one thing: for nothing to pass. Every year of stalemate is a year of sales. And a movement that publicly vows to fight its own legislation whenever that legislation is imperfect has promised the industry the one thing it cannot buy: a guarantee of stalemate, delivered free of charge, signed by the dogs' own advocates.

The status quo is not neutral. The status quo is the total, unrestricted, exemption-free legality of electric shock, prong pressure, and strangulation as training methods for every dog in almost every American jurisdiction. Anyone who kills an achievable ban has not preserved their principles. They have voted, effectively, for that status quo. The bill they defeated protected no military dog, because it never could. It merely un-protected everyone else.

There is honor in refusing to compromise your ethics. There is no honor in confusing your ethics with your strategy while dogs pay the difference. The pet parents of this country do not need our movement to be pure. They need it to be effective. Their dogs cannot eat our principles.

Questions Worth Answering Out Loud

So let the debate happen, in public, on the merits. I will start it with the questions I believe every advocate, every trainer, every pet parent, and every purist owes an honest answer to:

If a bill would end legal shock collars for more than 99 of every 100 dogs, who is served by killing it? The dogs, or the industry that sells the collars?

Name one movement in history that abolished an entrenched, economically defended practice in a single exemption-free sweep and made it stick. Prohibition tried. How did that end?

If the Dutch exception for police and armed forces dogs was a betrayal, why did Dutch advocates take the ban, watch the police and Defense stop acquiring shock-trained dogs, and put the exception's review on the government's 2026 calendar? Why did Belgium's animal protection groups respond to the Walloon derogation by proposing an end date instead of opposing the ban? And why is nobody, anywhere, fighting to bring shock collars back for pet dogs?

How many more years of fully legal shock, for every pet dog in America, is the acceptable price of a symbolic stand about federal military dogs that no state legislature has the constitutional power to regulate in the first place?

If an exemption with a sunset clause, mandatory review, and public reporting requirements is still unacceptable, what exactly is the plan, and when has that plan ever worked?

And the hardest one: when a bill that could have protected millions of dogs dies, and the tools stay legal for every dog including the working dogs, what do we call the strategy that produced that outcome? Because the dogs have a name for it. They call it another year in a shock collar.

The comment section is open. The legislative session is not open forever.

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