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Independents in Parliament: Temporary Status or Final Destination?

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ABSTRACT

Political parties are essential for structuring parliamentary decision-making in democracies. However, in some countries, as many as 10% of legislators experience spells outside of parliamentary party groups. This paper sheds light on this important group of independent politicians by analyzing whether and when they join existing or new party groups. We argue that the electoral motivations of members of parliament (MPs) affect their incentives for reaffiliation. We capture electoral motivations with two factors: the personal vote of legislators and membership in minor parties that do not have their own parliamentary groups. We test this argument using a novel dataset covering over 800 spells of independence and 500 entries into party groups in three Central and Eastern European countries (Lithuania, Poland, and Romania) since the early 2000s. We find that independents affiliated with a minor party are more likely to form a new party group, while MPs with a significant personal vote or those not affiliated with a minor party are more prone to join an existing party group.

1 | Introduction

Political parties are essential for structuring parliamentary decision-making in democracies. Theoretical arguments about legislative politics and executive-legislative relations build on the assumption that all members of parliament (MPs) belong to a party in the legislature and that parliamentary party groups "are the main actors in legislative politics" (Giannetti and Laver 2001, 533). However, many MPs experience spells outside of any parliamentary party group (PPG), typically after leaving their original party group even though doing do means giving up basic office benefits like financial and staff resources, if not parliamentary leadership positions.[1] Whether such periods of independence end with an entry to an existing party group, the creation of a new one, or leaving the legislature, how long legislators remain independent, and especially the reasons for these patterns, remain relatively unknown. This paper addresses these questions by examining independent legislators and their entry into existing or new parliamentary party groups in three European countries with a high prevalence of independents in parliament.

Focusing on the entry of independent MPs into existing or new party groups is important for several reasons. Like other forms of party instability, it affects parliamentary parties' bargaining leverage, policy positions, and internal cohesion, voter support, and, ultimately, public policy outcomes (Ceron and Volpi 2021, 2022; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020; Heller and Mershon 2009a; Ibenskas 2020; Laver and Benoit 2003; Sikk and Köker 2023; Yoshinaka 2016). Affiliation decisions of independents are of particular importance for two additional reasons. First, an independent MP joining an existing or new group is more common than MPs moving between parliamentary groups (Golder et al. 2022). As a demonstration of the ubiquity of independents, consider Figure 1 showing the share of independent MPs in the three countries considered here. While
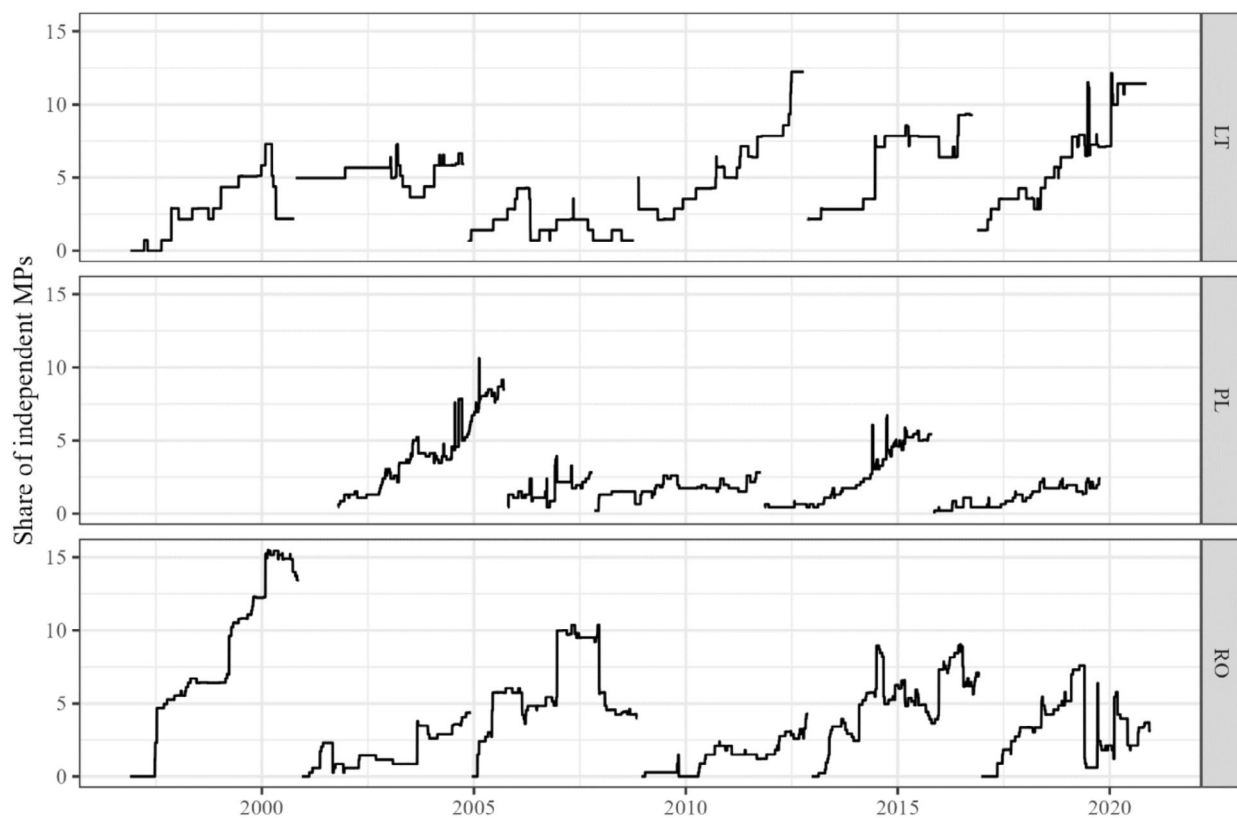
Source: Own elaboration

FIGURE 1 | Share of independent MPs.

generally the number of independents rises throughout the parliamentary term, multiple drops occur as a result of legislators entering existing or new groups. Thus, the share of independents at any moment ranges from 0% to more than 10% of all MPs, with an average of 2% in Poland and 4% in Lithuania and Romania.[2] Experiencing a spell of independence is quite common: in a given term, the share of MPs who were independent for at least some time ranged from 10% in Poland to 12% in Lithuania to 14% in Romania.

Second, since independents are neither in government nor in opposition, they can hold the balance of power between the two blocs. In the countries analyzed here, 17% of the time independents held the balance of power in parliament as neither the government nor the opposition had a parliamentary majority. The decisions of independents to join existing or new groups can therefore have significant consequences for the government's majority.[3] For example, Lithuania changed from a minority to a majority government after four independent MPs joined the government parties in January 2020.

Overall, the combination of the high mobility of independent politicians and the potential of their affiliation decisions to change the political balance of the legislature makes it important to understand why and when independents enter existing or new parliamentary groups. Surprisingly, this question has received very limited scholarly attention. Research on parliamentary party unity and party switching has mainly focused on what can be seen as an opposite question, namely, why and

when MPs try to *escape* parliamentary party discipline, either rebelling during votes (Bøggild and Pedersen 2023; Carey 2007; Jastramskis et al. 2023) or by leaving their groups altogether (Klein 2016; McMenamin and Gwiazda 2011; Nielsen et al. 2019; O'Brien and Shomer 2013; Shabad and Slomczynski 2004). While some studies also examine which party group switchers join (Desposato 2006; Hix and Noury 2018; Kemahlıoğlu and Sayarı 2017; McElroy and Benoit 2010; Radean 2022; Thames 2007), they do not compare the utility of joining a group and remaining independent. Research on political personalization mostly examines parliamentary independents who also ran as independents (Brancati 2008; Weeks 2016). However, many MPs become independents only after leaving their parliamentary group. Indeed, this was the case in 97% of the spells of independence considered here.

In this paper, we argue that re-election motivations influence the incentives of independent MPs to create new groups, join existing ones, or remain independent. We capture electoral motivations with two factors: (1) the personal vote of legislators and (2) membership in minor parties that do not have their own PPGs. We expect that MPs are more likely to join an existing group if they lack a substantial personal vote and if they are not affiliated with minor parties. The creation of new groups is anticipated to be more likely when MPs lack a significant personal vote and if they belong to a minor party.

Our empirical contribution is to test our expectations with new data on independents and party instability events in three

countries in Central and Eastern Europe from around 2000 to 2020: Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. Not only are these newer democracies less well-studied than the more established ones in Western Europe, but their MPs exhibit a wide variety of party switching behaviors, making them an excellent place to examine independent legislators. Our results suggest support for most of our expectations. Therefore, remaining independent in parliament for extended periods is consistent with the re-election imperative that is fundamental to legislative behavior.

2 | Independence Versus Affiliation: Conceptual Clarifications

Who are independent politicians? The party politics and legislative studies literatures use several definitions of independents based on who the politician is "independent" from: an extra-parliamentary party organization, a party in the electorate, or a party in public office (Key 1964). For example, regarding affiliation with extra-parliamentary party organizations, scholars have examined the selection of non-partisan ministers (Costa Pinto et al. 2018). Other studies have focused on politicians who run as independents in elections (Brancati 2008). Weeks (2016, 582) combines two party "faces" (party-in-the-electorate and parliamentary party) in his definition of an independent as "someone running for office on their own and who does not take a party whip."

While recognizing the importance of alternative definitions, in this research we follow the work on legislative party switching that conceptualizes independent politicians based on their affiliation with parliamentary party groups (PPGs). Heller and Mershon (2009a, 8) note that legislators may "outswitch"—leave their PPG without joining another one. Depending on the country context, being an independent can mean not belonging to any PPG or being members of a "mixed" group (Giannetti and Laver 2001; Heller and Mershon 2009a).

MPs can move in and out of the independent MP status in different ways (Golder et al. 2022). This can happen through individual or collective *exits* from existing PPGs. It can also happen following the *collapse* of existing PPGs that occur if the group no longer meets the (usually numeric) requirements for setting up a PPG (see also Martin (2021) for PPG collapses in the European Parliament). On the flip side, independent MPs may not only join (individually or collectively) existing PPGs (*PPG entry*), but they may also create new ones (*PPG creation*). Since PPG entry and creation have different implications for the parliamentary party system (e.g., in terms of party fragmentation), and may be the result of different processes, we study them as distinct outcomes.

3 | Research on Legislative Party Switching

To develop our theoretical argument, we build on research regarding legislative party switching. A core assumption in this research is that legislators' party affiliation strategies in the parliament are driven by their objectives to secure re-election, to gain influential positions in the executive and legislature that grant them office perks and policy influence, and to align with parties that are ideologically and policy-wise close to them

(Desposato 2006; Heller and Mershon 2009b). Legislators continually reassess the utility of each PPG affiliation option based on the total expected utility determined by re-election chances, office positions, and the ideological and policy compromises required by each PPG membership. However, the leaderships of both the "home" and potential recipient PPGs also play a significant role by providing incentives for legislators to remain or switch affiliations (Desposato 2006; Heller and Mershon 2009b; Laver and Benoit 2003). Additionally, the legislative cycle (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013), institutions (Klein 2016; Mershon and Shvetsova 2013; Nikolenyi 2019; Radean 2022), and switching decisions made by other legislators (Laver and Benoit 2003) are important.

While research on legislative party switching is well-developed, it has devoted less attention to the question of why MPs choose to remain independents instead of joining an existing or new PPG. Many factors that explain why MPs become independents may also clarify why they choose to remain independents. In the following sections, we review explanations from the party switching research that are insightful for understanding why legislators may become independents and discuss how they might also elucidate why they decide to stay independents for extended periods of time.

For *legislators*, a key benefit of independence is *policy purity*. Unlike PPG members, who often vote against their preferences due to party discipline, independent MPs can vote according to their conscience. This suggests that MPs far from their current—and other existing party groups—would be more likely to become independent (cf. Desposato 2006). Additionally, MPs will likely stay independent if PPGs remain distant from them. However, a major cost is the loss of significant *office benefits* and policy influence. Independent MPs face limited privileges like reduced financial and administrative support and less speaking time. The degree of this cost depends on parliamentary regulations, making MPs less inclined to become or stay independent if the loss of privileges is particularly severe. Incentives to become or remain an independent MP could also be lower at the time when a new government is formed and positions in government and parliament are distributed (Mershon and Shvetsova 2009).

Regarding costs and benefits for *parliamentary party groups*, their leadership wants MPs' policy preferences to align with the PPG. MPs with different preferences may be encouraged to leave (Heller and Mershon 2008). Similarly, independent legislators whose preferences don't match any PPG are less likely to join a PPG. Moreover, accepting independent legislators may bolster the government's support, ensuring its survival and legislative success (Kato and Yamamoto 2009). This argument applies to opposition parties too: when government support weakens, accepting in-switchers can enhance their influence and threaten government stability.

The research on party switching also acknowledges that MPs can become independents *involuntarily*. Involuntary moves can be triggered by PPGs, when a legislator who did not follow party policy or was involved in scandals is expelled (Heller and Mershon 2009a). Involuntary moves may also result from the combined effect of parliamentary rules and other MPs' switching behavior. Specifically, MPs could also become independents

after their PPG collapsed because some members left, and the group no longer met the required (usually numerical) thresholds (Heller and Mershon 2009a; Martin 2021). Independent MPs who were expelled from their original PPGs may be less attractive to other groups, while their colleagues from the collapsed PPGs, given that they became independents involuntarily, may be keen to join another group. Furthermore, an MP should be more likely to create a new PPG if there are enough other MPs to work with to meet the thresholds for group creation.

4 | Electoral Motivations to Remain Independent

Recognizing the importance of previously discussed explanations, we focus here on the importance of *electoral motivations* in understanding legislators' decisions to remain independent. We assume that most MPs are interested in re-election and/or being elected to another important position (such as executive positions at the subnational level).

The significance of electoral motivations is certainly not novel in the party-switching literature. A prominent argument posits that switching can be driven by limited re-election opportunities within the current party (Radean 2022; Thames 2007). However, while this may explain why MPs become independents, it is less useful for understanding the affiliation strategies of independent MPs who are not members of parliamentary party groups. Another vital argument is that, in countries where voters disapprove of switching, MPs should avoid switching either too early or too late in the parliamentary term to prevent voter backlash (Mershon and Shvetsova 2013). Conversely, if the party system is less institutionalized, MPs may switch before elections to enhance their chances of re-election (Mershon and Shvetsova 2009, 219). Independent MPs, who have usually "switched" by leaving their previous party groups, may be less concerned about the costs associated with switching to another group. Nevertheless, independent MPs often find it more challenging to secure positions on party lists, leading to lower re-election prospects compared to those affiliated with PPGs. Thus, they should be more inclined to join a party group as the next election nears. Simultaneously, independent MPs may also have incentives to join groups earlier in the term to take advantage of the office benefits that group membership offers.

Our argument highlights two additional factors that we believe are important for understanding the electoral motivations of MPs who remain independents for extended periods. These factors are: (1) the personal vote of legislators and (2) membership in minor parties that do not have their own PPGs. A personal vote has been previously shown to affect the propensity of MPs to leave their groups (Nielsen et al. 2019). The personal vote is based on politicians' personal reputations that are distinct from those of the party (Carey and Shugart 1995) and that can result from politicians' experience, activities, or personal characteristics (Cain et al. 1987). We follow numerous studies (e.g., Shugart et al. 2005) by examining the personal vote in lawmakers' districts, but we also concentrate on the individual appeal that the most prominent politicians may cultivate on a national level. The two aspects (local/district and national) of the personal vote align with the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization (Balmas et al. 2014). We consider both

levels together since our focus is on the overall effect of the personal vote.

We contend that legislators with a strong personal vote can enhance their chances of re-election by staying independent for extended periods. There are two main reasons for this. First, MPs with a strong personal following can find it easier to join a PPG at any time.[4] This is because independent MPs with a personal vote can bring additional votes to the parties they switch into, thus making them attractive to potential recipient parties. Especially under candidate-oriented electoral systems (such as open-list PR), some of the voters who supported the MP in her former party are likely to follow the MP into the new party (Nielsen et al. 2019, 45). Knowing that she can easily find a party to join, an independent MP with a significant personal vote can increase her chances of re-election by waiting to see which party is most likely to perform well in the upcoming election or which party will offer the most appealing candidacy. Additionally, these MPs are likely to consider more carefully which party to join because switching again could be seen as opportunism by their supporters and therefore erode their personal appeal. Under more party-oriented electoral systems (such as closed-list PR) some voters may also support parties because they like their candidates, although it is likely that legislators' personal vote, and therefore the electoral incentives of recipient parties to accept them, are weaker than under a candidate-oriented electoral system.

Second, depending on the electoral system, a strong personal vote could make the prospect of getting elected as an independent candidate realistic. Independent candidates have been successful under the Irish single-transferable vote system (Weeks 2016), but also in Russia and Ukraine (Thames 2007; Mershon and Shvetsova 2013). Thames (2007, 244) finds that independent MPs with higher electoral single-member district margins in Ukraine were less likely to join party groups. In countries with direct elections of mayors, independent MPs may run as independent candidates. Overall, these arguments suggest that independent MPs with a personal following will remain independents longer, even until the end of the parliamentary term.

Hypothesis E1. *PPG entry is less likely if an independent MP has strong personal vote.*

Hypothesis C1. *PPG creation is less likely if an independent MP has strong personal vote.*

The second part of our argument is that MPs may also remain independents in parliament because they are members of a party without a parliamentary group (referred to as a "minor party" here and below). Research on legislative party switching implicitly assumes that MPs who leave a PPG also leave the party associated with that PPG. However, parliamentary independents are often members of "minor" parties that lack the numbers to reach the numeric thresholds to set up its own PPG.[5] This is usually the case for one of two reasons. First, MPs may become parliamentary independents because they are involved in establishing a new party and have therefore left both their former parliamentary group and the party. Second, if a PPG collapses, its former members become parliamentary

independents but remain members of the party.[6] The recent split of the German Left Party provides a useful illustration. In December 2023, its 38 representatives in the Bundestag became independent because 10 them were involved in creating a new party, the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, while the rest of the MPs, though remaining members of the Left Party, no longer had sufficient numbers to preserve the party faction (*fraktion*) status.[7]

We argue that minor party representatives are less likely than other independents in parliament, who also lack party affiliation, to enter an existing group. Instead, if possible, they should create a new group that represents their party or remain independents. First, consider the choice between entering an existing group and remaining independent. "True" independents, lacking both parliamentary group and party affiliation, face the daunting prospect of running as independent candidates, especially if the electoral system provides limited chances for independent electoral candidates. Joining an existing group becomes a more attractive option, as the MP is likely to be nominated by this party for election. In contrast, minor party MPs can be nearly certain they will be able to run with their parties in the next election if they remain independent in parliament. This can be appealing because some minor parties may have significant popular support. Moreover, the electoral brand of the minor party is likely to suffer if its representatives join a larger party's group, as the minor party may struggle to distinguish itself from the larger party in the eyes of the electorate.

Hypothesis E2. *PPG entry is less likely if an independent MP is a member of a minor party that lacks its own parliamentary group.*

Now consider the choice between entering a new group and remaining independent. A "truly" independent MP, without a parliamentary group or party affiliation, should prefer joining a new group if its members plan to run in the next election as a party. However, this new group is just one of several options for the MP, as they can also join one of the existing groups. Conversely, as discussed above, joining an existing group is not attractive for minor party representatives, while creating their own group is very appealing because it should provide their party with greater media visibility and credibility as an electorally viable option.

Hypothesis C2. *PPG creation is more likely if an independent MP is a member of a minor party that lacks its own parliamentary group.*

5 | Research Design

5.1 | Case Selection and Institutional Contexts

Our argument concerns democratic parliaments that allow MPs to become independents and switch between existing or new PPGs. Independent MPs exist (see endnote 1), and such switching is permitted and common in many European countries (Volpi 2019). Additionally, E2 and C2 indicate that creating PPGs requires more than one MP. Among EU member states,

Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands do not meet this condition. Another related aspect for C1 and C2 is a certain degree of instability in the party system, which enables the electoral success of new parties while avoiding excessive instability that would diminish the meaning of party and PPG affiliations. Thus, our argument applies to most contemporary European party systems, like those in France or Italy, where new parties are increasingly successful, yet established parties remain relevant (De Vries and Hobolt 2020).

Our empirical analysis examines the lower parliamentary chambers in three Central and Eastern European countries: Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. In each country, we cover the period from the late 1990s or early 2000s to around 2020 (1996–2020 in Lithuania and Romania, and 2001–2019 in Poland). While this choice is partly due to data availability, we also exclude the early to mid-1990s on substantive grounds. These late 20th-century years of democracy were marked by significant fluidity and distinct characteristics in parties and institutional frameworks; therefore, their inclusion could make our findings less applicable to the broader set of democracies.

Independent MPs and their movements to existing and new PPGs are prevalent in all three countries, providing us with a sufficient number of cases and variation in the dependent variable. Although they share multiple characteristics due to their regional context, the three countries have different electoral institutions. Additionally, there is intra-country variation in electoral institutions: Romania employed a closed-list PR system from 1996–2004 to 2016–2020, and a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system from 2008 to 2016.

The variation in electoral institutions is significant because, as discussed in the theoretical section, E1 and C1 (the effect of personal vote) and E1 (the effect of minor party membership on joining existing groups) are more likely to receive support under electoral institutions that are candidate-oriented and allow independent electoral candidates to succeed. In this context, Lithuania and one of the Romanian cases (closed-list PR) represent two extremes. Under Lithuania's mixed parallel (or mixed-member majoritarian, MMM) system, election candidates are important in both the majoritarian and nationwide (district magnitude = 70) open-list PR tiers. Independent election candidates have moderate chances of success in two-round single-member district contests, where the candidate pool tends to be fragmented due to contamination from the PR tier. In all elections held so far, independent candidates have won at least two seats. In contrast, voters have no option to choose individual candidates in Romania's closed-list PR system, where independent candidates must secure a full Hare quota in a district (with a mean district magnitude of between 7 and 8). Meanwhile, the open-list PR system in Poland and the Romanian MMP system are candidate-oriented (Popescu and Chiru 2020) but offer limited opportunities for independent electoral candidacies.[8] In Poland, a 5% national threshold is applied to independent candidates, while in Romania, independent candidates must achieve an absolute majority of the vote in their single-member districts.

Parliamentary regulations that determine the privileges of independent legislators are another important contextual factor.
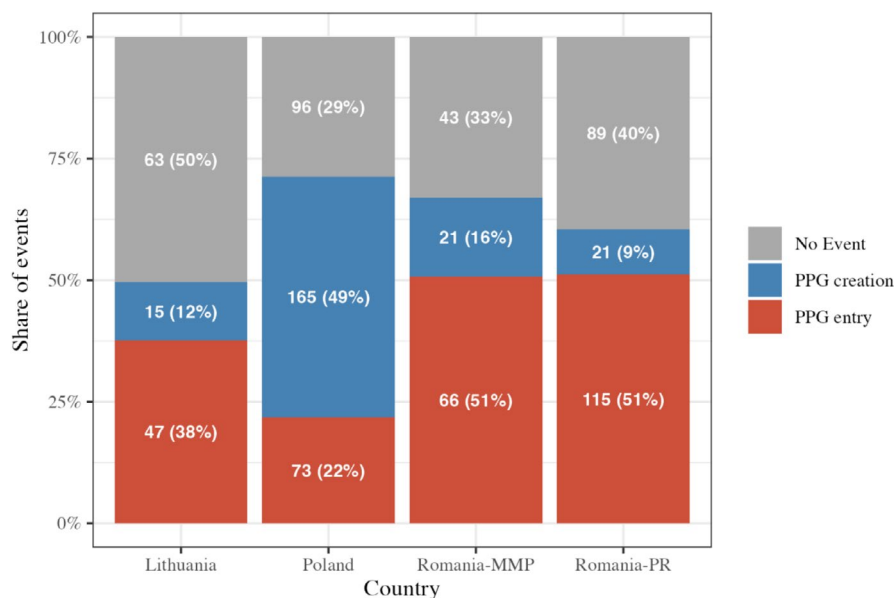
FIGURE 2 | Frequency of PPG entry and creation.

Independent MPs in Poland and Romania have fewer rights than those in Lithuania. They lack voting rights in coordination committees (bodies that set parliamentary agenda), have less debate time, and receive no funding since parliamentary groups' funds are not allocated to them. While they can join committees, seat allocation is controlled by parliamentary groups. Conversely, in Lithuania, independent MPs belong to a "mixed group" with rights comparable to regular groups.

Each country allows switching, but PPG formation rules vary. In Lithuania and Poland, any group of MPs can form a group if they meet the numerical threshold of 7 MPs (5% of total; 3 or 2% in 1996–2000) in Lithuania and 15 MPs (3%) for clubs or 3 MPs (0.7%) for circles in Poland. Circle members have fewer privileges than club members but still hold a better position than independents. Thus, in our analysis, we consider both clubs and circles as PPGs. In Romania, the numerical threshold is similar (10, about 3% of all MPs), but the additional requirement that at least 10 founding MPs have to be elected from the same party or electoral alliance has made the formation of PPGs quite challenging.

5.2 | Dependent Variables: PPG Entry and Creation

Our dependent variables are the number of days (within a single legislative term) that a legislator remains independent. This precision of measurement is relatively uncommon in the research on legislative party switching, which more frequently uses months, years, legislative sessions, or terms as time units. We collected detailed information on party switching from a wide variety of sources, beginning with the official websites of the parliaments and cross-validating this information with media reports and other governmental and academic works.

An independent legislator can remain independent until the end of the legislative term or end the independence spell in one of two ways: entering an existing PPG or participating in creating a new PPG.[9] The observations where independents neither entered nor created a PPG are right-censored because MPs remained independent until the end of the legislative term or their early departure from the parliament. Censoring at the end of an MP's term is necessary due to the lack of information on what would have happened if they had remained in office longer.

If an MP experiences more than one spell of independence during a legislative term, we count these as separate observations. In total, we observe 125 (Lithuania), 337 (Poland) and 355 (Romania) spells of independence (see Figure 2). These numbers roughly reflect the size of the lower parliamentary chambers (141 in Lithuania, 460 in Poland and between 329 and 412 in Romania).

The descriptive evidence suggests a significant impact of electoral and legislative institutions on the behavior of independent MPs. First, the share of non-events (50%) in Lithuania, the country where independent MPs have most privileges and independent election candidates have moderate chances of electoral success, is higher than in Poland (29%) and Romania (37%). Second, PPG creations are more common in Poland, where they ended 47% of all spells of independence, than in Lithuania and Romania (only 12%). We discuss the implications of this descriptive evidence in the concluding section.

Figure 3 shows the number of days that MPs who entered or created PPGs spent as independents. In all three countries, a significant number of entries occur days or weeks after the MP becomes an independent, but MPs sometimes remain independents for a year or more before finding a suitable PPG.[10] For MPs who eventually joined an existing group, the median time as independent was almost 4 months. For MPs who entered a new group, the median length of the independence spell was almost 1 month. Duration of independence was longer in Lithuania and particularly Romania than in Poland.

5.3 | Explanatory Variables

Measuring the personal vote (*Hypotheses E1 and C1*) poses notable challenges due to the variations among the four electoral systems analyzed. We utilize two established methods for measuring the personal vote: one relies on electoral data for individual candidates (e.g., Söderlund and Von Schoultz 2024), while the other focuses on candidates' personal vote-earning attributes (PVEA) (Shugart et al. 2005). By integrating these approaches, we create a dichotomous measure of personal vote for our primary analyses (see Table 1).

When individual-level electoral outcome data is available, we utilize it to assess personal votes at national and/or district levels. The dichotomization process involves setting a threshold at the 75th percentile of this variable's distribution for all MPs in the respective country. We set this higher threshold

believing only independent MPs with strong personal votes can yield noteworthy electoral gains for recipient parties or win seats as independent candidates.

For Lithuania and Poland, we utilize legislators' individual preference votes, a recognized data source for assessing personal vote in open-list PR systems (Nielsen et al. 2019; Söderlund and Von Schoultz 2024). In Poland an MP is deemed to have a significant personal following at the district level if their preference votes exceed 4.9% relative to the total valid votes in that district. In Lithuania, personal votes at both local and national levels are measured by comparing the number of preference votes to the valid votes cast in elections. Due to the existence of only one proportional representation (PR) district, MPs may attract their preference votes across the country (indicating strong national-level personal appeal) or within a specific locality (local-level personal following).
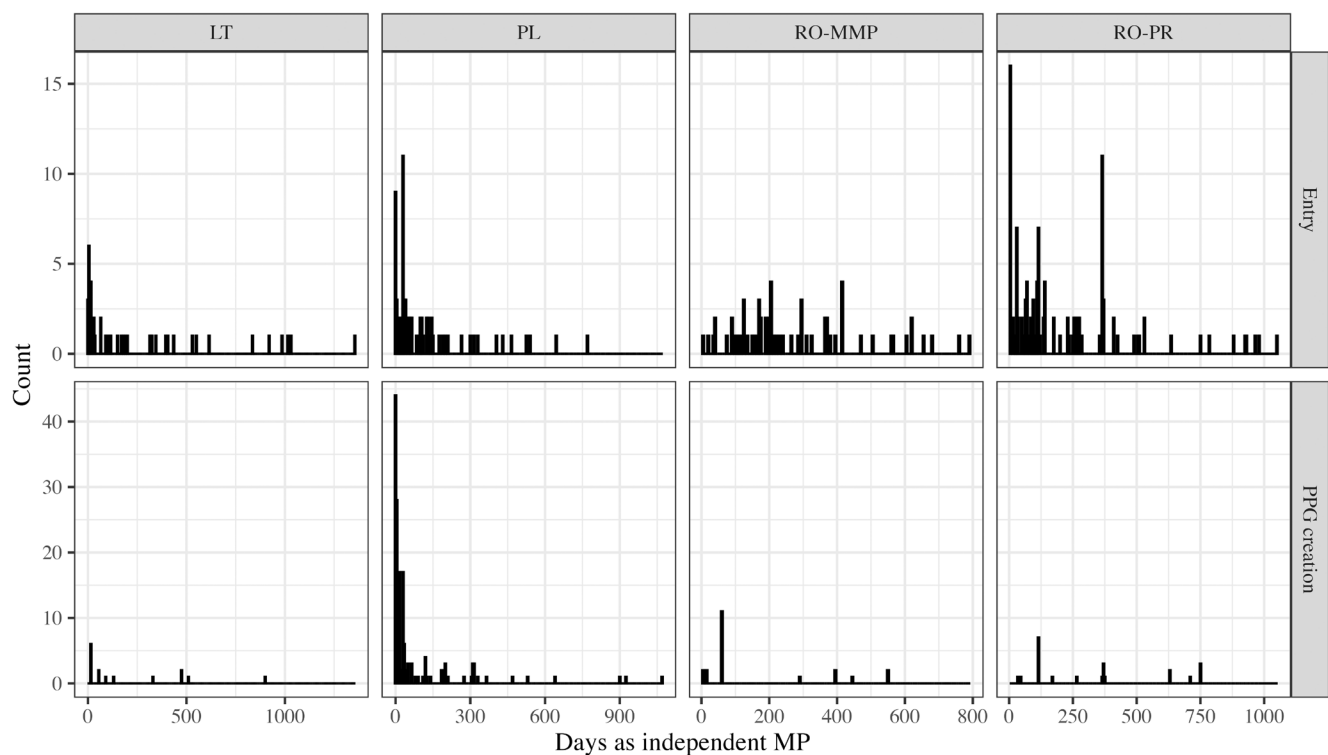
Source: Own elaboration

FIGURE 3 | Duration until PPG entry and creation.

TABLE 1 | Measures of personal vote.

Country	Measures (threshold in parentheses)	
	Local/district level	National level
Lithuania (MPs that ran in PR)	Preference votes/number of valid votes in election (0.011)	Experience of holding positions in government, parliament or PPGs
Lithuania (MPs that ran only in SMDs)	SMD vote share (0.30)	
Poland	Preference votes/valid votes in district (0.049)	
Romania MMP	(SMD vote share/PR-district vote share)—1 (0.092)	
Romania closed-list PR	Experience of holding mayor position	

Note: Threshold values used to dichotomize the relevant variable are set to the 75th percentile of the variable's distribution for all MPs in the respective country. Variables lacking threshold variables are dichotomous.

A small number of MPs (11 spells of independence, 9% of the total) elected in single-member districts (SMD) without participating in the PR tier are considered to have a personal vote if their first-round SMD vote share ranks above the 75th percentile among all MPs. For Romania's MMP system, we gauge local-level personal voting by comparing an MP's vote share in their single-member district to their party's vote share in the multi-member PR district. This approach aligns with research indicating that in democracies with less established party systems, this variation is largely influenced by personal votes (Moser and Scheiner 2005).

We complement these measures with PVEA when data on individual electoral outcomes is lacking. In Poland and Romania (and SMD-only MPs in Lithuania), the national-level personal vote is captured by the dichotomous variable indicating experience in leadership roles within government (prime minister or minister), parliament (such as president or vice-president of parliament or chair of a permanent legislative committee), or a parliamentary party group (chair) in the previous parliamentary term or in the current term (but prior to becoming an independent MP). We anticipate that recent experience in these positions boosts MPs' national name recognition through media exposure and allows them to build a personal reputation from their actions while in these roles. For the district-level personal vote under Romania's closed-list PR system, we approximate it by the experience of serving as a directly elected mayor in a municipality within the MP's district. Political experience at the local level has been identified as a key factor of district-level personal vote (Shugart et al. 2005).

The overall personal vote measure takes a value of 1 if an MP has a significant personal vote at either the local/district or national level.

For *Hypotheses E2 and C2* (MPs affiliated with a minor party without a PPG are less likely to join an existing group and more likely to form a new one), a dichotomous variable *Minor party affiliation* indicates that the MP was a member of a minor party without a PPG or was in the process of creating a new party at the time when they became independent.

5.4 | Control Variables

We also control for several factors discussed in the party switching literature.[11] The *absolute distance between the policy position of a legislator* and their two closest PPGs captures policy incentives for MPs and PPGs. We estimate legislators' positions by using the Optimal Classification (OC) procedure (Rosenthal and Voeten 2004; Armstrong et al. 2014) to scale parliamentary voting records downloaded from parliamentary websites. Information on this variable is missing for around 25% of the observations, mainly due to the relatively late introduction of electronic voting in Romania and some short spells of independence during which the independent MP did not cast enough votes for their position to be estimated. We therefore fit two sets of models, one without and the other one with the policy proximity variable. Estimates presented below are based on the model fit on the full dataset; the only exception is the estimates of the effect of the policy proximity variable.

The *parliamentary support of government*, measured on a daily basis, captures the office-seeking incentives for PPGs to accept independent MPs. Moreover, to control for the possibility that MPs who became independents involuntarily have different affiliation strategies, we code a dummy variable (*Expulsion*) indicating that the MP was suspended or expelled from their PPG and another dichotomous variable (*PPG collapse*) that indicates whether the MP became independent following a collapse of their parliamentary group. We further control for the possibility that MPs who left (voluntarily or not) their former group with other legislators may be more or less likely to enter existing groups. Thus, when modeling PPG entry, we use a control variable *Co-leavers* that computes the share of co-leavers from the total number of MPs. When modeling PPG creation, we control for the difference between the share of co-leavers and the share of MPs needed to create a PPG (*Relative Co-leavers*). High negative values of this variable mean that the number of co-leavers is low relative to the threshold for establishing a PPG. Concerning the two timing variables, the months during which cabinets were formed or dissolved are referred to as *government formation periods*, while 6 months prior to the election are classified as the *pre-election period* (cf. Mershon and Shvetsova 2009, 209).

5.5 | Methods

Since our dependent variable is the time until the occurrence of an event (PPG entry or PPG creation), we are interested in how our independent variables influence the rate of an event occurring (given that an MP has remained independent up to that point). Following Quiroz Flores (2022, 40), we fit a joint Cox proportional hazards model with PPG entry and PPG creation as two competing risks.[12] After fitting the initial models, we check whether the proportional hazards assumption is violated. If that is the case, we include interactions with the natural logarithm of time for any explanatory variables that violate the assumption (Box-Steffensmeier and Zorn 2001). This allows for the likelihood of entry and creation to change over time. We fit separate models for each country-electoral system dyad: Lithuania (MMM system), Poland (open-list PR), Romania (closed-list PR) and Romania (MMP system). We use robust standard errors clustered by spells of independence. We also note that the limited number of PPG creation outcomes in Lithuania and Romania (see above for the descriptive evidence) leads to some extreme coefficient values. We nevertheless report these results below while treating them with caution.

6 | Analysis and Results

Due to space constraints, we provide the full model estimates in Appendix C. Figure 4 presents log-transformed relative hazard rates for the explanatory variables alongside 95% confidence intervals.[13] A log-transformed relative hazard ratio above 0 indicates that an increase in an independent variable increases the likelihood of an event (such as PPG entry), while a relative hazard below 0 signifies that an increase in an independent variable decreases the likelihood of an event occurring. To facilitate interpretation, the figure also displays the percentage change in the relative hazard. For the explanatory variables that violate the proportional hazards
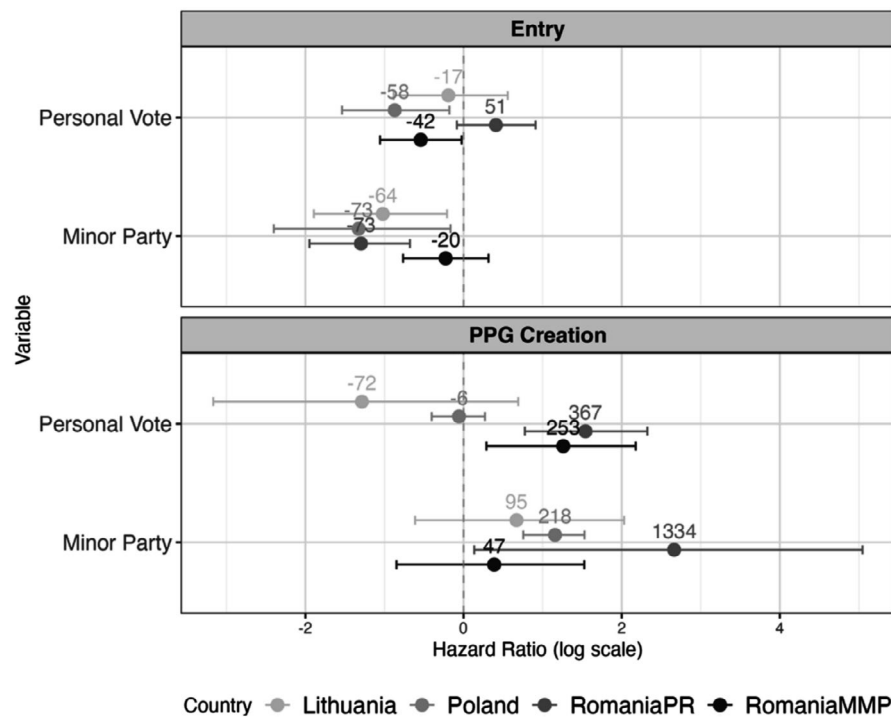
FIGURE 4 | Relative hazard of PPG entry and creation: Personal vote and minor party. Numerical values in the figure indicate the estimated value of the change in the hazard. Based on Model 1 in Tables 12–15 in Appendix C. 95% confidence intervals.

assumption (minor party variable for Poland, the PPG entry outcome), Figure 4 illustrates the estimated effects at the median value of the observed duration of the non-affiliation period (148 days). Appendix C shows changes in the hazard rate over time for this variable.

Our first set of hypotheses posited that MPs with a significant personal vote would remain independent longer by being less likely to enter existing PPGs (E1) or create new ones (C1). We find moderate support for E1. In Poland and Romania–MMP, the hazard of entering an existing group decreases by more than half when the legislator possesses a substantial personal vote. However, the association between personal vote and PPG entry is not statistically significant for Lithuania or Romania–PR. We obtain similar results with alternative measures of personal vote (Appendix D).

These findings underscore the heightened importance of the personal vote within candidate-oriented electoral systems. Leaders of potential recipient parties are keen on attracting popular independent MPs due to the potential electoral gains, which allows these MPs to join a group at any time. Conversely, under the closed-list PR system, legislators' personal reputations carry less weight in electoral outcomes, making the personal votes of MPs less significant for potential recipient parties. This indicates that even for independents with a substantial personal vote, waiting until late in the term to decide which group to join can be risky, as an attractive offer may not be available. Additionally, since their political careers depend more on party decisions than on their personal votes, independent MPs are less concerned about their personal votes being compromised by multiple switches. Thus, joining one group and then transitioning to another is a more feasible option than in the candidate-oriented system.

The question remains why the personal vote is not linked to PPG entry in Lithuania's candidate-oriented electoral system. Independent MPs with strong personal votes should have a dual advantage: they are attractive to recipient parties and have good chances of winning seats as independents in single-member districts. We speculate that the relative openness of the Lithuanian electoral system encourages even independent MPs with limited personal votes to run. For instance, Andrius Šedžius, after leaving the Social Democrats in 2010, ran as an independent in 2012 in the Saules single-member district. Despite only securing 0.1% of preference votes in the 2008 election, his first-round vote share in the single-member district was 15%, rising to 53% in the second round. Though he failed to secure re-election in 2012 with only 8% in the first round, reaching the second round was feasible, as the top two candidates received only 18% and 16% of the vote.

Hypothesis C1 on the negative effect of the personal vote on the creation of new groups is rejected. We observe a positive association between personal votes and PPG creation in both Romanian cases, while there is no statistically significant relationship in Lithuania and Poland. These findings indicate that independent MPs with a strong personal vote often seek to leverage it for forming new political entities. In the statistical model, involvement in an existing minor party or the establishment of a new one is already accounted for as a minor party variable. The personal vote variable's statistical significance in Romania, above and beyond the effect of minor party membership, highlights that MPs with a personal vote are primarily those who strive for minor parties to establish their own parliamentary groups, while less popular members of these parties sometimes defect to larger groups. Nevertheless, the relatively low occurrence of PPG formations in Romania renders this speculation tentative.

Our second set of hypotheses is that MPs affiliated with minor parties are less likely to join existing groups (E2) but are more likely to form new ones (C2). When entry is the outcome variable, the effect of minor party membership is statistically significant for Lithuania, Poland, and Romania-PR, but not for Romania-MMP. This supports our argument that minor party representatives should be hesitant to join a group of a larger party to avoid undermining their electoral brand.

The non-significant result for Romanian-MMP stems partly from the planned merger between the National Union for the Progress in Romania (UNPR) and the People's Movement Party (PMP), whose MPs sat in parliament as independents. As the first step towards the merger, 10 PMP MPs joined UNPR's group of 25 MPs in July 2016. The significant number of PMP legislators and the prominence of its *de facto* leader, former president Traian Basescu, meant that this merger (canceled after the 2016 parliamentary election) would have been a merger of equals, not a takeover by UNPR. Thus, this case does not contradict our logic that minor parties are generally reluctant to join the groups of larger competitors.

When PPG creation is the outcome variable, the effect of minor party membership is statistically significant for Poland and Romania-PR, but not for Lithuania and Romania-MMP. The statistical insignificance in the latter two cases is likely due to the small number of PPG creations. Overall, the findings support our argument that minor parties aim to establish their own groups to enhance their credibility and gain more publicity.

6.1 | Cumulative Incidence Functions of PPG Entry and Creation

For interpreting survival models, Quiroz Flores (2022, 39) recommends using cumulative incidence functions computed for some specific observations in the sample. This refers to the probabilities of moving from the initial state (i.e., independent) to another state (i.e., entry into an existing group or creation of a new group) in a specified time period. In Figure 5, we provide these functions based on four MPs in Poland, which allows us to demonstrate the effect of our key variables of interest.

The four spells of independence share key control variables. Each instance saw the government with a narrow parliamentary majority, with MPs leaving their parties voluntarily or with others. These spells illustrate all possible combinations of significant personal vote and minor party membership. Andrzej Rucinski
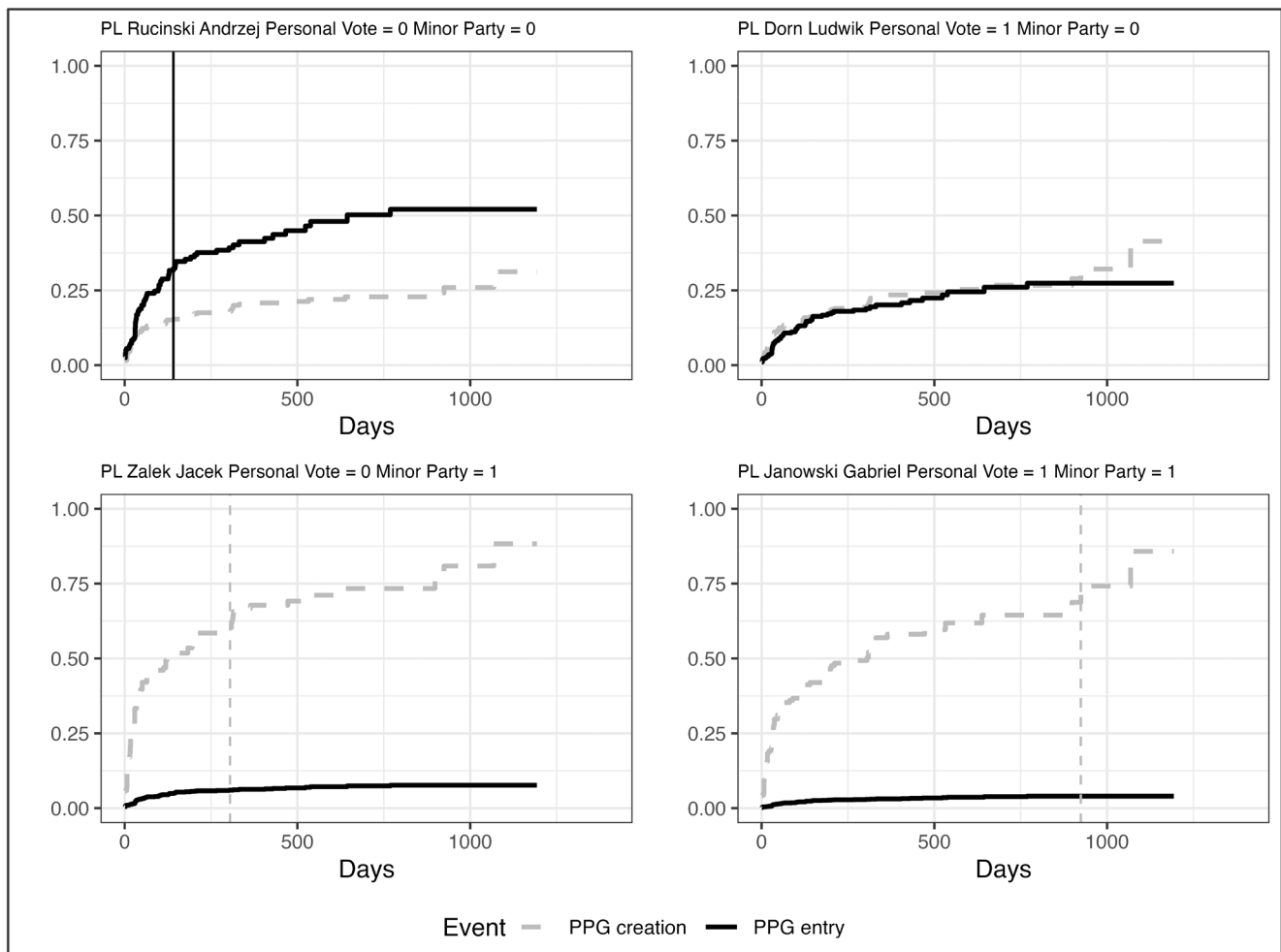
FIGURE 5 | Cumulative incidence of PPG entry and creation. Based on Model 1 in Tables 12–15 in Appendix C. Vertical lines indicate the occurence of the PPG entry event (solid line) or PPG creation (dashed line).

lacked a strong vote or party affiliation, being elected in 2005 for Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland with 2366 preference votes (1% of valid district votes); he briefly joined a splinter group before becoming independent in December 2006. Ludwik Dorn, elected in 2007 with 81,696 votes (17% of the district total), served as a government minister and parliamentary speaker in 2005–2007, left Law and Justice in October 2008, joining Poland Plus briefly before departing in May 2010 to become independent in parliament without party affiliation. Jacek Żalek, a Civic Platform MP elected in 2011 with 8103 votes (2% of total), left the party and its group in October 2013 to join a new party led by Jarosław Gowins, Poland Together. Gabriel Janowski, leader of the small Alliance for Poland, was elected in 2001 with 21,651 votes (7% total) on the Polish League of Families list; he became independent in January 2003.

The personal vote effects predicted by E1 and C1 can be seen by keeping minor party membership constant and comparing (1) Rucinski with Dorn and (2) Zalek with Gowin (see Figure 6). Supporting E1, MPs with significant personal votes (Dorn and Gowin) have a lower incidence rate than those without large personal votes (Rucinski and Zalek). For example, after 250 days as an independent, the entry incidence was 0.38 for Rucinski and 0.18 for Dorn. However, contrary to C1, the incidence of forming a new group is similar within each MP pair.

The effects of the minor party variable hypothesized by E2 and C2 can be evaluated by holding the personal vote constant and

comparing (1) Rucinski with Zalek and (2) Dorn with Janowski. As per both hypotheses, entry incidence is higher when MPs are not from minor parties, while PPG creation is higher for those affiliated with minor parties. For instance, after 250 days as independent, entry incidence was 0.18 for Dorn and 0.06 for Janowski, whereas the group creation incidence was 0.59 for Janowski and 0.16 for Dorn.

The outcomes in these four cases align with the incidence functions. Rucinski joined the Law and Justice group in April 2007, while Dorn remained independent until the September 2011 election, where he gained a spot on the Law and Justice party list due to his appeal. Żalek joined, in July 2014, the parliamentary group created by Poland Together and another minor right-wing party. Janowski created and led the Patriotic Movement group in July 2005 with two independent MPs.

6.2 | Effect of Control Variables

Regarding the *control variables* (see Figure 6 for log-transformed relative hazard rates), neither the hazard of PPG entry nor creation appears to be related to the policy distance variable. While our measure uses the distance to the two closest groups, we obtain similar results when using proximity to the closest PPG or average distance to all PPGs. Although these results suggest that affiliation strategies of independent MPs may be less related to their proximity to the existing groups,
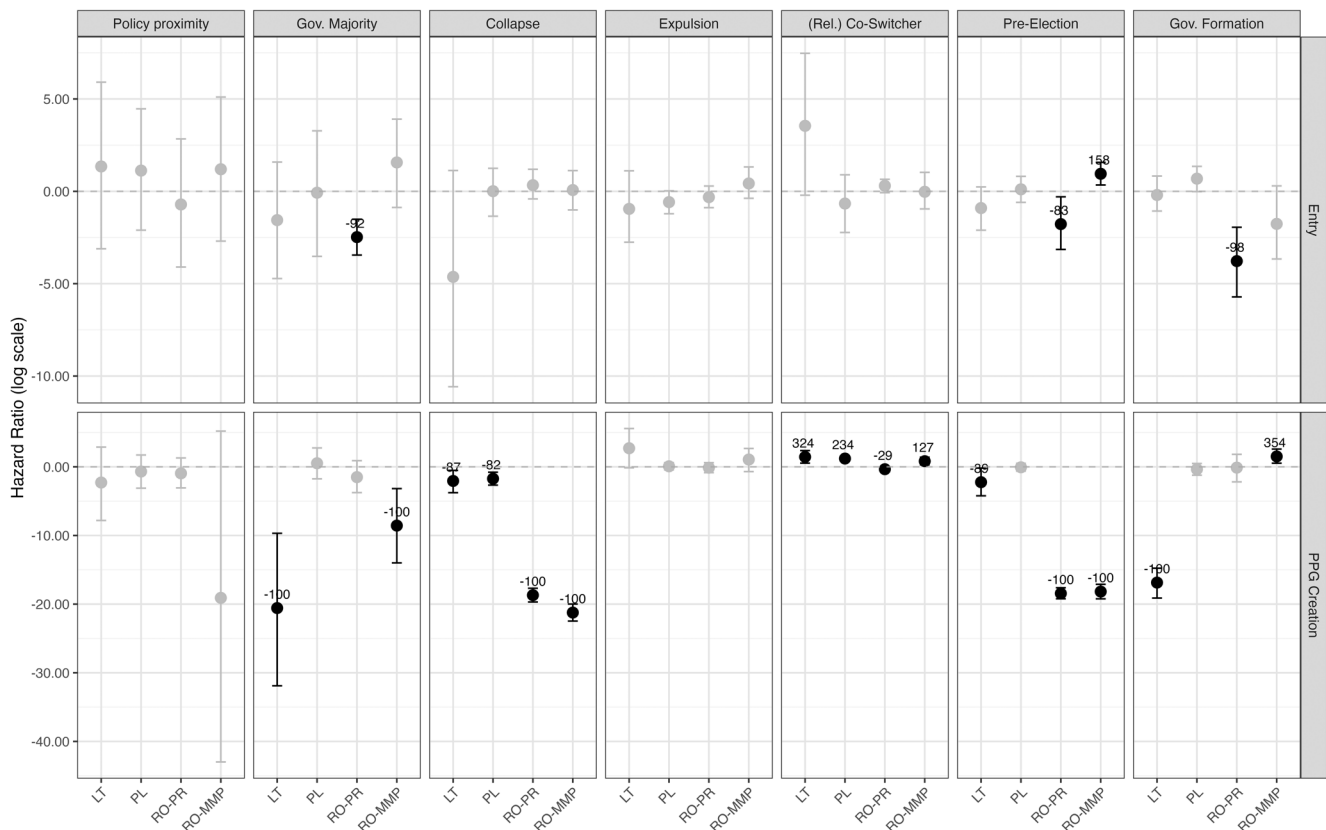
FIGURE 6 | Relative hazard of PPG entry and creation: Control variables. Numerical values in the figure indicate the estimated value of the relative hazard. Based on Model 2 (policy proximity) or Model 1b (all other variables) in Tables 12–15, Appendix C. Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals are shown in black if significantly different from zero; shown in gray otherwise.

the lack of an effect may result from challenges of model specification or measurement. Future research should investigate this puzzle, potentially with different data sources than the ones used here. Similarly, evidence that MPs are more likely to join existing or create new groups when the government has lower parliamentary support is present for only a limited set of country cases.

Expelled MPs remain likely to join or form PPGs. The collapse of political groups negatively impacts new group formation but not entry into existing ones. Additionally, an increase in co-leavers relative to the threshold for forming a new group strongly influences new group creation in three out of four instances, but it does not affect entry into existing groups.

New group creation is less likely during pre-election periods in Lithuania and Romania, potentially due to few PPG creations. Conversely, Poland saw many new groups without a statistically significant pre-election effect. There is no pre-election impact on group entry in Lithuania or Poland, but the effect is negative in Romania-PR and positive in Romania-MMP. This suggests party leaderships prefer independent MPs in candidate-oriented systems to boost parties' electoral performance.

Lastly, the variable indicating government formation periods has a negative effect on entry in Romania (but statistical significance is only reached for the PR period). This suggests that in Romania, independent MPs receive few significant party positions during the government formation periods. They may prefer to wait for new governments to be inaugurated to extract other benefits (such as particularistic benefits for their districts) in exchange for joining groups of government parties. The government formation period significantly influences group creation in Lithuania and Romania, though results may reflect the limited PPG formations in these cases.

7 | Discussion

While parliamentary parties are essential for the functioning of representative democracy, independent legislators exist both in older and younger democracies (Martin and Strøm 2023, 166). Independents in parliament frequently join existing groups or form new ones, with potentially significant implications for the parliamentary balance of power and decision-making outcomes. The question of why some independent MPs maintain this status while others join existing groups or create new ones is therefore an important one.

We demonstrate that electoral motivations play a crucial role in determining how long MPs remain independents. First, parliamentary independents affiliated with minor parties (i.e., parties without an affiliated parliamentary group) are less likely to join existing groups but more likely to create new ones. Second, legislators with personal appeal are less inclined to join groups, remaining independents longer. This effect seems to depend on candidate-centered electoral systems (like open-list PR), which enhance the allure of independent MPs for parties and raise costs for MPs to switch affiliations. However, electoral systems that let independents win do not appear to boost the impact of

a personal vote, as independent MPs without a strong personal vote still try to run as independents.

Beyond our focus on MPs' electoral motivations, the descriptive evidence presented above suggests that regulations granting significant privileges to independent MPs, like forming mixed or technical groups, make them less likely to join existing or new ones. Additionally, lower thresholds for forming party groups encourage independent MPs to create new groups.

Our findings reveal how independent MPs influence political outcomes. Those without significant personal votes or minor party ties are likely to join existing groups, potentially shifting the balance of power in parliament. Conversely, independents with a substantial personal votes tend to maintain their independence longer, potentially creating uncertainty in decision-making since neither the government nor the opposition may be able to secure a majority. Lastly, minor party-affiliated MPs can form new groups, which alters the bargaining environment and could lead to changes in government composition.

Our results also suggest the importance of the institutions for understanding independent MPs' behavior. Consistent with comparative literature on the topic inspired by the study of Carey and Shugart (1995), we find that personal vote effects depend on electoral institutions. Our findings on legislative regulations align with studies showing their significance for party switching (Nikolenyi 2019; Pinto 2025).

Our study echoes the recent tendency in the research on party switching to distinguish among its different forms. While earlier work recognized the diversity of the switching phenomenon (Heller and Mershon 2009b; Kreuzer and Pettai 2003), more recent studies examine individual and collective switches separately (Hix and Noury 2018; Kemahlıoğlu and Sayarı 2017; Nikolenyi 2019; Volpi 2019) or focus on the less-researched forms of switching, such as PPG collapse (Martin 2021). The reason for doing so is that switching is a heterogeneous phenomenon that requires scholars to develop different arguments to account for its diverse forms, or to adapt the arguments depending on the specific form of switching under investigation. In this study, we did both. On the one hand, we developed a new argument about how the membership in minor parties affects independents' affiliation decisions. On the other hand, we adapted and empirically tested arguments in the existing research on legislative party switching (see Nielsen et al. 2019) about the importance of MPs' personal vote. Our study therefore provides an important contribution to the research on legislative party switching. Additionally, by showing that the presence of independents in parliament is a common phenomenon in many countries, our study encourages future research on their parliamentary behavior in a broader comparative perspective.

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Endnotes

[1] Only 2% of MPs in our data were elected as independents.

[2] These numbers reflect broader patterns. A snapshot from late August 2024 shows the average share of independents in 28 European democracies' lower chambers was 2.8%. At least one independent MP was present in 20 parliaments. The analysis includes EU/EFTA member states and the United Kingdom. Finland and the Netherlands are excluded because a single MP can form a group.

[3] Evidence shows that after joining a new parliamentary group, MPs align their voting behavior with the faction (McCarty et al. 2001). Thus, independent MPs' decisions to join government or opposition factions likely impact parliamentary vote outcomes.

[4] We assume that joining a PPG increases MP's re-election chances, enabling the legislator to run with the associated party.

[5] In a few EU countries, like Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands, a single MP can form a group. Our argument does not apply to these nations.

[6] Less commonly, a PPG may start with members from multiple parties that ran in an electoral alliance. If the alliance is dissolved, members of smaller partner parties could leave the joint group. Additionally, an MP might exit their PPG and the party to join a smaller party that cannot form its own PPG.

[7] Both groupings were given the reduced group (*gruppe*) status in February 2024.

[8] In the Romanian MMP system, candidates ran in single-member districts (SMDs) within multi-member districts (MMDs). Seats were allocated to parties based on vote share in MMDs, and candidates received seats within parties based on SMD support.

[9] Note that new groups can be created by independent MPs only, or by independent MPs together with some MPs leaving their former groups.

[10] We excluded "technical" cases of independence where an MP had to be independent for short periods of time purely because of legislative rules and/or where the MP unambiguously declared, even before becoming an independent, their intention to move to another group.

[11] Due to space constraints, we provide more detail about these variables in Appendix A. Appendix B presents descriptive statistics for all variables.

[12] We follow the government duration literature here, for example, Diermeier and Stevenson (1999).

[13] These estimates are obtained with simPH package in R (Gandrud 2015).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.