

CONGRESS is vacating the premises today. It has bitten the ABM bullet, the surtax bullet, the tax reform bullet and it's now time to rest and rusticate among the grass roots or in faraway vacation retreats.

It wasn't long ago that the professional grumps and diagnosticians were making the familiar lament that nothing was moving on Capitol Hill but the tourists. "Democrats' Loaf-in Stalls 30 Major GOP Bills," the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee newsletter carped recently. But last week for the first time the new 91st Congress seemed to lurch into motion.

Still, there is not much ground for exultation in the White House. There may be less than meets the eye in the victories that are being acclaimed as personal triumphs for President Nixon in Congress. The surtax was a legacy of the Johnson administration. The reform bill was a triumph for no one more than House Ways and Means Committee chairman Wilbur Mills. The administration won the day on the ABM vote but it was Margaret Chase Smith of Maine whose name got in the papers.

President Nixon's popularity has been a fragile and sometime thing. It began to sag in late June and mid-July. The Harris Survey showed support for his conduct of the war slipping to 38 per cent in mid-July. The Gallup Poll showed a mild drop from 63 to 58 per cent in general approval of how the President was handling his job in the same period.

DESPITE the wide divergence between the two pollsters, they agree on one thing. A downward trend in Mr. Nixon's popularity was halted by two events—the landing of two Americans on the moon and the President's trip to Asia.

There is a limit to how many extra-terrestrial events and round-the-world jaunts a President can summon up to bolster his political ratings. Though there were barely enough votes to save Safeguard, it was hardly a resounding victory for a new President, fresh in his power and advocating a program proclaimed to serve the national security.

On Capitol Hill there are



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dark mutterings among those in his own party. The common complaint is neglect at the hands of the President and his staff. Those chafing the worst are the liberal Republicans from the urban Northeast and Midwest who find themselves politically more vulnerable with Richard Nixon in the White House than they did in the Lyndon Johnson era.

"The inattention we are getting from the White House runs across the board, all the way from Goldwater to Javits," one respected young Senate Republican told us recently. "I never see anyone from that place. I wouldn't even know what they look like. They don't ask me for anything and I'm not afraid of their taking anything away. Frankly, they haven't given me anything."

During our interview, an aide popped into the private office to ask if a copy of an impending speech on the ABM should be sent to the White House. "Oh hell, don't bother, don't bother," the Senator said resignedly. "They don't care. They'll probably think I'm just trying to bug them."

NO ONE expects the President to emulate Lyndon Johnson, who courted, cajol-

ed and strong-armed members of the House and Senate like a circus barker in front of a half-empty house. But there is an impression current on Capitol Hill, within the President's party, that Mr. Nixon has immured himself in the Oval Office and that the men around him, the J. Walter Thompson operatives, are playing it all close to the vest.

Sen. Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.) publicly vented his annoyance in a recent interview with the Baltimore Sun. "Anything you do in terms of rebuilding the Republican Party is useless," he said, "unless there is developed within the party a board spirit of belonging. The spirit can be built only by open discussion, public discussion, public debate."

In one respect this is strikingly reminiscent of the early days of the Kennedy Administration. It is as though the Irish Mafia has been supplanted by the Nixon Mafia in the highly excitable sensibilities of congressmen.

Mr. Nixon's electoral mandate, like that of John Kennedy, was near-invisible. His popularity today is still marginal, both in the nation and in Congress. The specter ahead is of legislative paralysis as in those cruel and wearying end-of-session days and nights in 1961 and 1962.

And so the supreme challenge facing the Nixon administration will be to expand its base of popularity. Not in outer space, but where people still live.

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Administration Is Facing Challenge To Broaden Its Base of Popularity