Although budget authority for discretionary federal outlays is established annually through the budgeting process, Congress enacts supplemental appropriations bills outside of the budget cycle. Attempts to offset supplemental spending by enacting coincident rescissions (downward revisions of budgeted monies for specified agencies or programs) were made throughout the 1990s, but only in 1995 was supplemental spending completely offset by rescissions.

Supplemental appropriations for mandatory outlays are designated to accommodate revenue shortfalls in specific trust funds. Throughout the 1990s, only 9% of all supplemental appropriations were mandatory, whereas in the previous two decades, supplemental mandatory and discretionary spending were distributed fairly evenly.

Most discretionary supplemental appropriations in 1991 were for military operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield. Domestic spending dominated discretionary supplemental appropriations from 1993 to 1998, but defense spending re-emerged as the largest category in 1999 and 2000 because of peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. Humanitarian relief for refugees of these crises also raised discretionary supplemental spending for international causes to the highest levels of the decade.

Congress was unwilling to grant the full amount of supplemental appropriations requested by the President between 1993 and 1995, but the reverse held in all but one year since 1996. While Congress’s overall supplemental spending in the 1990s ($138 billion) was slightly larger than the President’s requests ($132 billion), the amount of total rescissions enacted by Congress was almost three times that requested by the President ($52 billion compared to $18 billion).