Retiree groups are trying to draw more attention to the steep cuts they have faced in company-sponsored health coverage this year, making a last push before the elections to try to get more seniors to the polls.

"Elderly Americans have to vote like their lives depend on it," said Edward F. Coyle, executive director of the Alliance for Retired Americans, a nationwide organization that advocates on behalf of seniors.

Stung by steep increases in premiums, or even the elimination of coverage altogether, groups representing both management and union retirees have set up voter registration drives, written lawmakers, attended rallies and have even taken out advertisements in major newspapers criticizing companies for cutting retiree benefits while boosting executive pay.

"A growing fear and even anger about broken retiree health-care promises is mobilizing thousands of retirees," said Michael Calabrese, director of the retirement security program of the New American Foundation, which is a nonpartisan policy institute in Washington.

Neither presidential candidate has focused on retiree health care, though it has been an important theme for Reps. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, and John Tierney, (D., Mass.), who have backed legislation to prevent companies from curtailing benefits after workers retire.

Most retiree groups, as nonprofit organizations, aren't allowed to endorse presidential candidates. But the Alliance for Retired Americans, affiliated with the AFL-CIO, has endorsed Sen. John Kerry. The group, which represents three million retired union workers, has organized registration drives to boost senior turnout in such battleground states as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Florida.

The elections coincide with the annual enrollment periods, when retirees are being notified of increases in costs for benefits in 2005. Retirees from International Business Machines Corp., Boeing Co., Lucent Technologies Inc. and dozens of others have been comparing and complaining about the changes on retiree Web sites.

Lucent retirees have been especially vocal. "We feel that Lucent has really broken its commitment to retirees," said Edward Beltram, a retired human-resources manager who is a spokesman for the Lucent Retirees Organization. His health-care premiums have jumped to $516 a month this year for him and his wife from $42 a month when he retired in 2001.
negotiating with Lucent on a contract that expires Sunday night.

The CWA, which represents more than 70,000 Lucent retirees, has taken out advertisements criticizing Lucent for cutting retiree health care even as top executives are richly compensated. The ads ran in the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today last week and this week. The union says Lucent is proposing increases in the cost of retiree health care that could cost a retiree as much as $700 a month.

"We realize this is going to be hard on retirees," said Lucent spokeswoman Mary Ward, but she says Lucent's revenue has shrunk from $33.8 billion in fiscal 2000 to $9 billion in fiscal 2004.

Write to Ellen E. Schultz at ellen.schultz@wsj.com and Shawn Young at shawn.young@wsj.com